

# Learner-Centered English Language Education

The selected works of  
**DAVID NUNAN**



DAVID NUNAN



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# Learner-Centered English Language Education

This carefully crafted collection provides a snapshot of the evolution of David Nunan's theoretical and empirical contributions to the field of second language education over the last 40 years. The volume focuses on the development of his work on second language curricula and, in particular, the work for which he is best known: learner-centered education and task-based learning and teaching. Part I traces the evolution of his approach to curriculum development. Part II addresses aspects of language and culture, which form the substance of his work as a teacher and an applied linguist. Part III illustrates some of Nunan's work as a teacher educator.

David Nunan has been a language teacher, researcher, and consultant for 40 years. He has lived and worked in many countries, principally in the Asia-Pacific region, but also in the Americas, Europe, and the Middle-East. His many books and articles expound his views on language, culture, and learning. In addition to his research and scholarly work, he is the author of several major textbook series for the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. These texts are based on his task-based language teaching approach, and are widely used in schools, school systems, and universities around the world.

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David Nunan

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# INTRODUCTION

## Origins

I grew up in a working class mining community in the semi-arid interior of Australia, 700 miles west of Sydney. As in working class communities in many parts of the world, formal education was taken very seriously, particularly by those who did not possess it themselves. It was the key to a better life. My father, who left school at the age of 11, took it as seriously as anyone. I'm not sure that he understood what it was, other than that it unlocked doors that had remained closed to him.

Like many mining towns, Broken Hill was run by the unions. The union bosses decided who could work and who could not (young women had to give up work when they married, whether they wanted to or not), which stores downtown could be patronized by union members and which could not, whether or not disputations with the mine managers would result in strike action, and so on. However, they also championed the cause of education, providing scholarships to children of unionists with academic aspirations.

In due course, I applied for a union scholarship, and spent one dusty Saturday afternoon with a dozen other hopefuls in a cramped room at the imposing Barrier Industrial Council building, known to the locals as 'The Kremlin', opposite the Sulphide Street railway station. There, we labored for an hour over an essay on why we should be accorded the singular honor of receiving a scholarship. We were then led out, one by one, to face an interviewing committee chaired by the local member of parliament. Several weeks after the interview, I received a letter of rejection from the union, and had to seek financial support elsewhere. Eventually, I obtained a scholarship from the Department of Education, which required me to teach for five years after graduating. Forty-plus years on and I'm still teaching.

## Early teaching experiences

Having graduated from university with a major in English language and literature, I was excited at the prospect of turning my learners on to reading and writing. In fact, my first day as a teacher came close to being my last. I was appointed to a high school in one of Sydney's toughest inner-city neighborhoods. I was soon to discover that 80 percent of the students were immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Reading and writing in their first language was a challenge. Reading and writing in a second was a distant dream.

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On that first day, I lose my way in the unfamiliar neighborhood where the school is located and arrive at the school ten minutes after classes have begun. The secretary points me down the corridor to my home classroom. Even from the school office the mayhem is palpable. As I make my way down the corridor, a tall man with granite features comes from the opposite direction, and enters the classroom. I hesitate in front of the closed door, listening to him attempting to restore order. Having no other choice, I open the door and step into the classroom. The scene is chaotic – upturned desks and chairs, books scattered across the floor. The granite-faced man turns on me as I enter.

‘You,’ he says, ‘sit over there.’

Meekly, I do as I’m told.

When a semblance of order is restored, he turns to me again.

‘And who are you?’ he asks.

‘Please, sir,’ I reply, ‘I’m the new teacher.’

He turns back to the class, says ‘See what I have to put up with?’ and marches from the room, leaving me to my fate.

It was an inauspicious way to begin. My credibility with the students, several of whom only seemed to be a couple of years younger than me, was close to zero, and my game plan of turning these young individuals on to literature was clearly utopian. From that first morning, we were at war. They saw me as a long-haired weakling. I saw them as louts. At the end of the first week, I asked an older, more cynical colleague for some tips on establishing discipline. ‘*Don’t smile until Easter!*’ he replied.

The warfare continued for most of the first term. Every so often there would be a knock at my door, and two burly police officers would appear and haul one or more of the kids out of class. One of the most insubordinate and troublesome students in the class was a large Yugoslavian boy named Bruno. One day, driven to the limits of my endurance, I had the school secretary send an official notice to his parents warning of suspension if his behavior did not improve. The following morning, halfway through the second period, the door to my classroom was flung open, and a giant of a man strode into the room. Grabbing Bruno by the throat, he hauled him out of his seat and growled ‘Me father! Me fix!’ Then, with an almighty swing of his hand, he sent Bruno flying across the room. Bruno hit the wall, and ended up in a crumpled heap on the floor, where he lay, fetus-like, his arms curled around his head. He stayed that way until his father strode out of the room. For the rest of the day, and most of the next, Bruno was very silent. For the first time, he obeyed directions, if somewhat sulkily.

Then something happened that brought about a radical shift in my attitude towards teaching, towards my role as a teacher, and towards the view I had of my learners. At the end of class Bruno lingered behind as the rest of the students gathered their bags and left the room. Then, as I was bending down to stuff my books into my bag, he came up behind me, produced a knife, and stabbed me. Then he dropped the knife and fled from the classroom.

Even though the stabbing turned out to be superficial, doing more damage to my sweater and shirt than it did to me, it sent me into shock. I picked up the knife – it was one of those small paring knives with a sharp point – and put it on the desk. Then I sat down. I started to shake all over.

My first thought, once I had determined that the stab wound did not require stitches, was that I needed to report the incident. But, instead of heading to the front office, I continued to sit at my desk with my head in my hands. What was I doing at this school? What good was I to these adolescents who were destined to be factory-floor fodder?

Instead of reporting Bruno for what was undoubtedly a serious infraction, and one that should have landed him in juvenile court, I decided to find out what made him tick.

Not surprisingly he failed to turn up for class the following day, and for the rest of that week, but did show up on the following Monday. He avoided any eye contact with me, kept his head down, and appeared to be doing his work. At the end of the lesson, as he was leaving the room, I touched his arm and asked him to stay behind.

At first, he was truculently silent, but when it became clear that I had no intention of having him punished for what was a serious offense, he began to relax. We sat down on opposite sides of a desk, and he began to give me a window on his world.

He was born in a small town on the Adriatic coast. He and his family had migrated to Australia four years previously. His father worked in a factory in Botany, an industrial suburb close to the airport. His mother was a hospital cleaner. His older brothers also worked. He and his sister were still at school. His father wanted them to leave school and get jobs so that they could contribute to the family income. His mother, on the other hand, wanted them to go as far as they could with their education. This was obviously a source of conflict within the family. His father solved family conflict with his fists.

'And what do you want to do?' I asked.

'I want to be a doctor,' he said. This brutish-looking boy who was disruptive and aggressive. Who beat up other boys. Who took a knife to his teacher. He wanted to be a doctor? 'But I never will,' he said. And then he hung his head. Defeated at 14.

I owe Bruno a great deal. He taught me the very first and, in some ways, most valuable lesson I was to learn as a teacher – that unless I knew my students, unless I took my bearings as a teacher from what filled their heads and hearts in the world beyond my little classroom where the roof leaked in winter and our lessons were punctuated by the 747s taking off from Kingsford Smith Airport, I had little hope of fulfilling my responsibilities as a teacher. He set me on a path to penetrate the hearts and minds of the other boys in this fractious class that I found myself with. And gradually, as they let me into their lives, they also let me teach. Conflict and aggression were never entirely absent, but being able to connect with most of the boys in the class made a huge difference to their attitude towards me. And in the world beyond the school year I soon changed my tune. Instead of replying *English*, when asked what I taught, I would say *Young people*.

In time, I moved on from the junior boys' high to a primary school and from there to a university language institute, where the next story takes place.

Back from a trip through Asia and Europe, I found myself out of both work and money. A friend who worked as a language instructor at the Institute of Languages at the University of New South Wales thought she could get me a job there teaching English to immigrants with professional and academic qualifications. Was I interested? I was.

The following week I was interviewed by the Assistant Director and was offered the job. The curriculum at the Institute of Languages was based exclusively on a course book series called *Situational English*, a series written for the Adult Immigrant Program by a committee based in Canberra, Australia's federal capital. Written in the 1960s, the series was based on the audiolingual method, which in turn was the pedagogical realization of Skinnerian behaviorism. Language lessons based on this method consisted largely of repetition and transformation drills. The teacher was to provide a cue and the students were to respond like laboratory rats. They were undergoing a form of operant conditioning.

*Instructor:* This is a book. Pen?

*Students:* This is a pen.

*Instructor:* This is a pen. These?

*Students:* These are pens.

And so on and so forth *ad nauseam*.



## 4 Introduction

Although, within psychology, theoretical linguistics, and related disciplines, Skinner's (1957) *Verbal Behavior* had been comprehensively demolished by Noam Chomsky (1965), in language teaching circles it was still very much in vogue. Initially, I went along with the method, mainly because I had no choice. Also, as a newly recruited instructor, I was reluctant to challenge the system. In any case, in the early weeks, I had nothing to recommend in its place.

This was my first experience at teaching adults. I expected them to be very different from the unruly high school students I had taught, but some classes were every bit as fractious as the adolescent classes on which I had cut my teeth – classes that consisted of warring factions of pre- and post-Allende Chileans, Croats versus Serbs, and xenophobic Swiss students who refused to share a class with Vietnamese refugees. However, these were the minority.

I read what I could in the field of andragogy, the study of adult learning. The most influential figure at the time was Malcolm Knowles, who, in a few years, would produce *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Knowles, 1983). To be honest, I thought that most of the principles could be applied to young learners as readily as to adults. The principle of building learning experiences on the out-of-school experiences of the learner seemed like common sense. However, my reading gave me my first contact with humanistic education, experiential learning, and the crucial importance of not only placing learners at the center of the educational experience, but leading them to take control of their own learning: in effect, helping them to become self-directed and autonomous. That, however, was for the future.

Most of the teachers were more interested in drawing their monthly salary than challenging the audiolingual orthodoxy that ruled the Institute. Some of the younger teachers, however, were ready to rebel. After all, we were the flower power generation; we had spent (some would say 'wasted') our undergraduate years in revolt. Late afternoons, if we had no evening classes, we would meet at the union bar for a beer or a glass of wine.

As I got to learn about the lives of my students, I fell in love with them. The students in my home class (the one I had inherited from my friend) were a fascinating mix. They came from all over the world, and all had led varied and interesting lives. Bushra and Jalil Beydoun were a married couple in their late 30s from Lebanon. Inga and Peta were sisters from Sweden or Iceland or somewhere equally exotic and remote. They were possibly the two most beautiful students I have ever taught. Another husband and wife couple was Jacques and Bridget from France. They were in their mid-20s, and both could have been movie stars based on their looks alone. Van and Phan were painfully shy Vietnamese sisters who sat quietly at the back of the classroom and never spoke unless addressed directly.

At lunchtime, we would sometimes gather on the roof that led off the student bar to drink wine and cook steaks on the barbecue that the bar provided. Despite his relatively limited English, Jalil was a great talker and would dominate the conversation. He was a small, rotund man, with a full beard and horn-rimmed glasses. As he talked, he would blink earnestly and nod his head. He was a committed Marxist, and would give us a serious lecture on this or that aspect of social justice. In class he was quiet and earnest. Despite the fact that English was his third language, after Arabic and French, he was not a 'natural' language learner, and had quite a struggle to improve. Bushra, on the other hand, seemed to pick up the language with little effort. Over time, I got to know them and we became good friends. I used to visit them in their little apartment in the inner-western suburb of Ashfield, and Bushra, who was a brilliant cook, would

whip up fabulous Lebanese spreads, while Jalil attempted to enlist me to his cause of the day.

I had begun keeping narrative accounts of my teaching, as well as carrying out semi-structured interviews with my students. I was fascinated at how different they all were in their motivation, reasons for learning English, and approaches to the learning process. I was also fascinated at the asymmetries between my teaching and my learners' learning. These insights and observations, born from the detailed documentation of a single class, led to a career-long interest in cognitive styles and learning strategies and their impact on individual learning trajectories and outcomes. However, they also led to a profound dissatisfaction with *Situational English* and audiolingualism.

Within weeks, I had grown heartily sick of *Situational English*. The rote drilling was boring, and seemed to have little effect on the ability of students to communicate in English outside of the classroom. This struck me forcibly one day when we had been practicing the question pattern:

Is this		pen(s)
Are these	your	book(s)?
		pencil(s)

The teacher was supposed to inculcate the target structure through a substitution drill:

'Is this your pen? Book.'

The students were meant to parrot back, 'Is this your book?'

'Pencils.'

'Are these your pencils?'

In order to make the exercise a little more meaningful, I passed a small cloth bag around the class and had students drop a personal object – a ring, a pen, etc. – into it. They then took turns extracting an object, and going around the class asking 'Is this your watch?' – or pen, or bracelet – until the owner had been identified. Not a particularly revolutionary technique, I have to admit, but it was more engaging than *Situational English*, and the students seemed to enjoy it. Within a few minutes they were engaged in the task, and producing the target structure effortlessly and fluently. I was very pleased with the efforts of the students. The exercise was a form of 'disguised drill', providing all of the benefits of the audiolingual substitution drill within a meaningful context. At the end of the lesson, one of the best students in the class accompanied me to the parking lot, where, instead of leaving the campus on a bike, my usual mode of transportation, I produced a set of car keys, and unlocked the door to a small Toyota. The car belonged to a friend, and I had borrowed it for a few days to move apartments. The student looked at the car, then at me, and asked in astonishment 'Teacher car?'

I groaned. 'What have we been practicing for the last hour? "Is this your car? Is this your car? Is this your car?" And, no, it isn't my car. It's a friend's.' I drove home discouraged. Clearly, there was still a significant gap between my pedagogical efforts and the students' learning outcomes. I needed to learn much more about my students and the developmental processes driving their language acquisition.

Getting useful data from students was not always easy, although any data I did manage to get was always instructive. Not long after the 'teacher car' incident, in order to break the relentless monotony of *Situational English*, I created a little role play to follow the rote drill, which was supposed to inculcate the pattern:

## 6 Introduction

Do	+	you	+	like	+	hamburgers?
		they				ice cream
Does	+	he	+		+	chocolate
		she				Pepsi
		they				

During the drill, students chanted responses to cues.

*Teacher:* Do you like hamburgers? (gives thumbs up)

*Students:* Yes, I like hamburgers.

*Teacher:* Do you like chocolate? (gives thumbs down)

*Students:* No, I don't like chocolate.

In a role play, simulating a students' party, the students were to circulate around the room alternately taking the part of host and guest, and asking other students about their food and drink preferences. As the students carried out the role play, I monitored their language, and assisted those students who were having trouble with vocabulary or the structure of the day.

I thought the class went very well and, as it was the last class for the day, I invited those students who had the time to join me at the union bar for a beer, soft drink, or glass of wine. Three or four of them joined me, including the Beydouns.

'So, what did you think of the class today?' I asked.

They all nodded their heads appreciatively, which told me very little.

'And what did you think of the role play?' I asked, turning to Bushra. She looked highly embarrassed, and after a little pause said 'No like role play.' My self-congratulatory smile faded instantly.

'You didn't?'

She shook her head.

'Why not?'

'No like . . .' Her voice petered out.

'She no like pretend,' said one of the other students. 'We no like pretend.'

I went home in a state of depression. Not only had one of my students failed to learn how to use the structure of the day, but she had also rejected my attempt to inject a little communicative realism into the classroom.

I bought a little notebook and began to compare the language that students used inside the classroom and the language they used outside of the classroom. I also recorded their interests and their reactions to the learning experiences that I provided for them in the classrooms.

Reflecting on these incidents forced me to confront the disconnect between what learners were able to do in the controlled environment of the classroom, and their ability to use the language they had learned to communicate outside of the classroom. It also reinforced the lesson I had learned as a schoolteacher. To succeed as a teacher, one had to start with where the learners were at, not with where you wanted to take them.

A co-teacher and I decided to run 'open door classrooms'. We would mix and match our students, co-teach, and try at least one new idea each day. We would do this in consultation with our students, because we knew how important it was to bring them with us on what was more than likely to be an unfamiliar and possibly challenging pedagogical adventure. As it turned out, the students loved it. My co-teacher had a wonderfully warm manner that students could relate to. She got them up out of their seats and used her drama training to simulate authentic interactions in the classroom. We got

away with what we considered pedagogical innovation, but what some of the older and more experienced teachers undoubtedly thought of as irresponsible tomfoolery at best and madness at worst, because of the support we had from the Assistant Director of Studies.

One day, as I was praising the students for their efforts, I was stopped in my tracks by one of them – an intense young man who said that it was nice of me to say how good his English was, but, when he tried to communicate with people outside of the classroom, no one could understand him. I realized that I was not doing the students any favors by my overprotective attitude. I needed to toughen them up. I began being more critical. I also decided that they needed greater exposure in class to the type of language they were encountering outside of the classroom. This was the seedbed of what would emerge as task-based language teaching.

## Entering academia

In the 1970s as a graduate student at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, I received formal training in theoretical linguistics, curriculum development, and in particular the ‘science’ of syllabus design, sociolinguistics, and educational psychology. I had the good fortune to come into contact with Mike Golby (Golby, Greenwald and West, 1975), Richard Pring (1976), and Ted Wragg (2005) among others. Also influential was Jerome Bruner, who had moved from Harvard to Oxford University, and who offered a series of lectures on child language development at Exeter.

During the long summer breaks, I worked as a language teacher at the Bell Educational Trust in Norwich. The program I worked on was based at the University of East Anglia, and here I came into contact with the Centre for Applied Research in Education. Key figures here included Lawrence Stenhouse (1976), Barry MacDonald and Rob Walker (1975), and John Elliott (2007). Through their work, I was introduced to naturalistic research methods including ethnography, action research, and case study. Stenhouse’s views on curriculum as process, and the centrality of the teacher to that process as a creator rather than consumer of curricula were particularly influential and provided a principled rationale for the ideas that had earlier emerged from my early teaching experiences, including learner-centered education, experiential learning, task-based language teaching, and localized, teacher-oriented curriculum development.

During the first term of my second year I spent some time teaching at a primary school, under the guidance of the head teacher, who had worked with A.S. Neill (1969) at Summerhill. To my knowledge, this was the only state school in the country where Neill’s progressivism had been implemented to any large extent. The head teacher had been appointed before the first sod had been turned in the construction of the school, and had a free hand in virtually all of the decision-making, from the architectural design to the selection of staff. Needless to say, only those who were able to articulate principles of progressivism, experiential learning, and the centrality of the child to the learning process had any chance of being employed. Although ideologically committed to this philosophical orientation, and predisposed towards it by my teaching experiences in Australia, I was woefully underdone in terms of theory. Senior colleagues at the school, several of whom had also taught at Summerhill, steered me in the direction of thinkers from Dewey (1916) to Vygotsky (1966) to Kolb (1964) to Bruner (2006), whom I had already met, but whose writings were largely unknown to me. These scholars gave intellectual spine to my practical predilections.

When it came time to do my master’s dissertation, Mike Golby, my supervisor, encouraged me to explore one of the hot topics of the day, that of comprehensivization. Across

the country, secondary modern schools, which were intended to prepare the 'intellectually less able' for trade school, and grammar schools, designed to prepare pupils for university, were being required to amalgamate. The policy, which stemmed from the democratic notion that a child's future should not be determined at the age of 11 by the 11-plus examination, was bitterly opposed by many grammar schools, which saw comprehensivization as the 'dumbing down' of education.

Golby encouraged me to spend a term 'under cover' at a school in North Devon that was in the middle of comprehensivization. 'Spend the term there and see what's going on,' he said. Then he handed me a book that was to have a profound effect on my approach to educational research. The book, *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom* by Smith and Geoffrey (1968), was my first introduction to ethnography. Lou Smith, who was professor of educational psychology at the University of Chicago, was trained as a psychometrician. However, he had grown increasingly disenchanted with the agricultural-botanical paradigm and spent a year carrying out a detailed, ethnographic investigation of a single classroom in a suburban Chicago school. The result was *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom*.

During the 1970s, decontextualized, sentence-level approaches to linguistic analysis gave ground to discourse-level approaches. I was influenced by van Dijk (1977), who synthesized semantic and pragmatic approaches to the analysis of discourse, Halliday and Hasan (1976), who raised the question of what it was that distinguished coherent discourse from disconnected sentences, Hymes (1971), who drew a distinction between linguistic and communicative competence, and Widdowson (1978, 1979), who presented a clearly articulated agenda for the adoption of a discourse perspective in language education. The reading and work I had done as a graduate student in discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics were reinforced in my subsequent employment at Chulalongkorn Language Institute (CULI) in Bangkok, which I shall briefly describe in the next section. Some years later, back in Australia, I drew on this experience for my doctoral research. This was a complete contrast to the ethnographic work I had undertaken in England. Using a Hallidayan framework, and an experimental research design, I carried out a comparative analysis of the discourse processing operations of first and second language learners.

## **Curriculum research and development**

As indicated above, following my graduate studies and teaching work in England, I took a position as a teacher and curriculum developer at CULI in Bangkok. Although I had some undergraduate teaching, the position basically involved developing a comprehensive new undergraduate English language curriculum. I was attracted to this position because the curriculum was based on two principles to which I was totally committed: learner-centered instruction, and a discourse perspective on language.

A basic tenet of learner-centeredness is that information about and from learners should form the point of departure for all aspects of curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation. From my own teaching, as well as subsequent research, it was clear that, even on what on the surface looked to be very homogeneous groups, learners were different and learned in different ways. Even if their goals were identical, their learning styles and preferences differed, as did their aptitude for foreign language learning. In the early 1970s, Valette and Disick (1972) had argued that these differences demanded a degree of individualization. Individualization was an important element within the new CULI curriculum. Learners were offered different entry points into the program based on their proficiency, and were able to choose different pathways through the materials.

The linguistic aim of the program was to develop the academic discourse skills of the students, with a particular emphasis on reading and writing. As leader of one of the writing teams, I had the opportunity to apply the ideas of linguists such as Halliday and Hasan, and applied linguists such as Widdowson. Although these early attempts to apply discourse perspectives to the development of academic English skills were sometimes fumbling, they did reflect the paradigm shift that was taking place in pedagogy at the time.

In 1984, having completed a doctorate in the Faculty of Education at Flinders University in Adelaide and worked as a lecturer for several years at what was to become the University of South Australia, I took a position as the Founding Director of the National Curriculum Resource Centre (NCRC), a body funded by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. The brief for the Centre was to develop curricula and materials for the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP), to carry out research into adult immigrant language education, and to provide teacher education programs in collaboration with the state and territory adult education bodies that delivered AMEP programs on the ground.

These were exciting and challenging times. The federal department that funded the AMEP was fully committed to concepts that were now fully ingrained into my professional persona. *Situational English* was a distant memory. So large and diverse were the immigrant populations across the country that no single program could possibly cater to their needs. The center-periphery model of curriculum development (Lawton, 1973; Stenhouse, 1976) had been abandoned in favor of a local model in which teachers were to develop curricula in response to the needs of their learners. The challenge for the NCRC was that teachers needed help, but that, like teachers world-wide, they did not want to be told what to do. In any case, that would have been a contradiction in terms. One does not relinquish control with one hand and take it back with the other.

At the NCRC, my Associate Director, Jill Burton, and I, in collaboration with state-based academics and officials, engaged in a large scale exercise in documenting successful local practice at the same time as providing seed funding for a range of action research projects. The massive body of material that resulted from this exercise resulted in a series of curriculum frameworks. In the spirit of Stenhouse's (1976) vision of curriculum as process, rather than product, these did not dictate content, but suggested procedures and resources for teachers to exploit in developing their own locally responsive curricula. This national initiative drew on, and received support from, state-based research and development work that was also funded by the federal Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. Research such as that by Brindley (1984) into needs- and performance-based curriculum development and Willing (1988) into learning styles and strategies provided theoretical and empirical support for our curriculum development work.

Late in the decade, the NCRC morphed into the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University. Under the directorship of Chris Candlin, and with an enhanced budget, this Centre rapidly expanded the NCRC's research, teacher education, and publication program. It quickly established a national reputation as the pre-eminent center of applied linguistic research, not only in language education, but also in speech and hearing, audiology, translation studies, and a range of related areas. In a short time, this reputation extended to the international area.

The NCELTR years were productive ones for me. Curriculum research and development projects in Australia, Japan, and the Sultanate of Oman gave me an opportunity to contest concepts of task-based learning and localized curriculum development against the realities of teaching and learning contexts in Asia and the Middle East. The Omani

project was particularly interesting. The Ministry of Education in Muscat had decided to wrest control of the school English language curriculum from the British publisher that had established it, and that benefited financially from the sale of textbooks, for which it had a monopoly. The publisher, along with the British Overseas Development office, which naturally enough worked closely with the publisher, resisted strongly. In some ways, this could be seen as a prime example of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992).

It was against this politically charged backdrop that I was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the national English curriculum. Unaware that a decision had already been made to replace the British curriculum and textbooks, I recommended that the curriculum currently in place be retained, and that available funding be put into teacher education. There was little point in having the finest curriculum in the world if teachers were not equipped to teach it. I was quickly disabused. The curriculum would be replaced!

Eventually, a compromise was reached, and a national curriculum renewal and textbook project was established as a joint venture between the Omani Ministry and the British Overseas Development Agency. I was retained to write the curriculum guidelines and syllabus specifications, and to act as external consultant and evaluator.

In the early 1990s, I accepted the position of Founding Director of the English Centre and Chair Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Hong Kong. During my time back in Australia, I had maintained strong links with Asia, serving on the governing board of the Regional Language Centre in Singapore, as well as engaging in curriculum development and consulting work in Thailand, Japan, and a number of other countries. However, it was good to be physically based in Asia once more, particularly to be based in Hong Kong, the geographical center of the region.

Politically, Hong Kong was an exciting place to live. As 1997 and the handback to Mainland China approached, Hong Kong represented a 'living laboratory' for applied linguistic research. The government's policy of 'trilingualism and biliteracy for all' was an ideal that would most probably never be attained. However, it provided a context for a great deal of interesting research. Schools were deemed to be either 'Chinese-medium of instruction' (CMI) or 'English-medium of instruction' (EMI). There was a great deal of competition on the part of parents to gain admission for their children into EMI schools because of the advantage that proficiency in English brought in terms of employment and further education.

An increasingly globalized and interconnected world, with English as its communicative 'glue', also provided many opportunities in the wider region. I was fortunate to have doctoral students from both Hong Kong and the Mainland who took up and advanced my own research interests in curriculum innovation and change, task-based language teaching, learning strategies, language, culture and identity, discourse, and teacher education. Technology-supported language learning also became an important feature in several dissertations.

Within the University, times were interesting as well. Like other universities in the territory, the University of Hong Kong was an English-medium institution. To be admitted, students had to meet certain general proficiency standards. The mission for the English Centre was to help students develop the academic English skills to succeed in an English-medium institution. In applied linguistics, it had been long established that language and content were inextricably intertwined (Snow, 2005). In developing our courses, we therefore drew on content from the academic subject areas within the faculties. English for Law was a very different course from English for Engineering in terms of goals, content, and pedagogical procedures. This caused controversy, as regular faculty members, who had no understanding or appreciation for the nexus between language

and content, thought that we were trying to do their work. I was in constant conflict with faculty deans and school heads who exhorted me to 'fix up the students' grammar' so that they could get on with 'real academic teaching'.

The students themselves presented a fascinating linguistic profile. Many of them were reasonably proficient in English literacy skills, but poor at spoken English. On the other hand, while their spoken Cantonese was as one would expect from native speakers, their written Chinese was often very poor. Through school visits and classroom observations facilitated by students on the master's program in Applied Linguistics, I came to appreciate why. In many so-called EML schools, while the textbooks and written work were in English, virtually all of the instruction was delivered in Chinese. This linguistic schizophrenia was not surprising, as teachers of Science, History, and so on were judged on students' content mastery, not on the quality of their English.

Given the limited amount of time the Centre had with undergraduate students (between 25 and 50 hours per year), it was important to foster learner autonomy and self-directed learning skills, and these became important principles guiding course development. The work of John Biggs and David Watkins, Professors of Education at the University, had a significant impact on my thinking and the direction of my own research. Watkins and Biggs (1996) established that the notion of Asian students as 'relentless rote learners' was a myth, and that learners would do whatever was necessary in order to succeed.

In order to understand the experiences and perspectives of my learners, I engaged in a series of investigations, including large scale surveys as well as work built on the narrative (auto)biographical accounts from learners themselves (Benson and Nunan, 2004). Given the fact that our learners presented a pretty homogeneous sociocultural profile, of central interest to me was why some succeeded as language learners and users while others did not.

This work also led to controversy within the University. At an international conference hosted by the University, I presented some of the results of my work, not all of which showed practices within the University in a flattering light. This work was reported (and, in some cases, misreported) in the media, and I was called to a meeting with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for a 'please explain'. I did. At the end of my explanation, duly documented by a small team of registry officials, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor replied: 'I know this is true, you know this is true, but we mustn't let the public know.' This was an astonishing thing for a member of the academy to admit, but I had to forgive him, for he was an economist.

## Concluding remarks

This introduction is intended to put biographical flesh on the bones of my professional and intellectual development. I hope that the narrative provides a backdrop to the chapters that follow. Part I traces the evolution of my approach to curriculum development. Part II addresses aspects of language and culture, which form the substance of my work as a teacher and an applied linguist. In Part III I present three chapters that illustrate some of my work as a teacher educator. Within each part, the chapters are arranged roughly in chronological order. Through this arrangement, I hope that the evolution of my thinking as an educator and researcher is apparent.

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## PART I

# THE SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

In Part I, I include a series of chapters that trace the development of my approach to second language curriculum development. The concept that ties the chapters together is that of learner-centeredness, a concept that has dominated my thinking and my work as a teacher, teacher educator, researcher, and author over most of my professional career. Chapter 1 is taken from my first full-length book on learner-centered language curriculum development. It looks at the theoretical and empirical bases of learner-centeredness as well as key concepts such as communicative language teaching and the notion of language proficiency. Chapter 2 was originally published in the special 25th anniversary issue of *TESOL Quarterly*, and presents the communicative task as a central organizing principle in curriculum design. The third chapter is an edited compilation of two chapters from a 1999 book, *Second Language Teaching and Learning*, which updates theory and research into key concepts first introduced in my earlier book. Chapter 4 presents the text of a plenary presentation at the International TESOL Convention in Vancouver. It draws on narrative accounts from learners themselves which dramatize the centrality of the learner to the learning process. In Chapter 5, I present a set of learner-based strategies for closing the gap between intended and actual outcomes of instruction. The place of a focus on form in task-based language teaching has been controversial for many years, and in Chapter 6 I present my own perspective on the controversy. Chapter 7 is a relatively recent contribution to the third edition of *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. I have included it in this selection because it provides an updated account of task-based language teaching, and synthesizes recent theoretical, empirical, and practical approaches. Theory, research, and practice are well and good. However, if they are ignored by policy-makers, then their educational value is greatly diminished. In the final chapter in this part, I look at curricular policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific region in the wake of the emergence of English as a global language, examining in particular the impact of theory and research on governmental decision-making.



## CHAPTER 1

# LEARNER-CENTRED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

In the spring of 1986, I attended the annual International TESOL Convention, which that year was held in Anaheim, California. I presented two papers, one of which was on the learner-centred curriculum model that I was developing with colleagues in Australia for the Adult Migrant Education Program. Following the convention, I began working on an extended version of the paper. The result was a book-length treatment on theoretical, empirical and practical dimensions of learner-centred curriculum development. In this chapter, I look at the theoretical bases for learner-centred education, the relevance of learner-centredness to communicative language teaching, and the role of the teacher within a learner-centred curriculum.

Reprinted with permission from *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

## Introduction

One way of typifying curriculum models is in the degree to which they allow curriculum development to occur at the local level. A fully centralised curriculum, as the name suggests, is one which is developed in a centralised location and then disseminated (this is sometimes known as the centre-periphery model for obvious reasons). Many school curricula developed during the 1950s and 1960s accorded with this centralised model. They were often produced by a government department or agency, and then disseminated to a wide range of learning institutions. The responsibility of the teacher in such systems was often little more than to implement the curriculum and to act as ‘classroom manager’. An example of a centralised approach to language teaching is the *Situational English* course which was developed for teaching ESL in Australia during the 1960s and early 1970s. During this time, it was possible to go into language classrooms all over the country and find a similar curriculum in place for teaching a wide range of learners. In those days, the only criterion for differentiating learners was their level of proficiency.

During the 1960s, the relative inflexibility of centralised curricula, and a change in educational thinking which paid more attention to the learner, led to the 'school-based' curriculum development movement. School-based curricula are devised either wholly or in part within the teaching institution itself. Such curricula are capable of being much more responsive than centralised curricula to the needs and interests of the learners they serve. The learner-centred movement in ESL/EFL is partly an offspring of the school-based curriculum movement.

A perennial tension in language teaching is between those who subscribe to a subject-centred view and those who subscribe to a learner-centred view of language and language learning. The subject-centred view sees learning a language as essentially the mastering of a body of knowledge. The learner-centred view, on the other hand, tends to view language acquisition as a process of acquiring skills rather than a body of knowledge. Both viewpoints are quite valid, and most courses will reflect elements of both. It is the relative emphasis given to language as a body of content to be internalised, or language as a communicative process to be developed, which will determine which of the labels 'subject-centred' or 'learner-centred' should apply to a given curriculum proposal.

Proponents of learner-centred curricula are less interested in learners acquiring the totality of the language than in assisting them gain the communicative and linguistic skills they need to carry out real-world tasks. Implicit in this learner-centred view is a recognition that no one person (not even a native speaker) ever masters every aspect of the language. If it were possible to master every aspect of every skill in a given language, and if one had unlimited time to teach or learn another language, then there would be no need to make choices, and consequently no debate. However, given the fact that most learners do not have unlimited time (many may have only between 150 and 300 hours of formal instruction) it is crucial that appropriate choices be made.

## **Theoretical bases for learner-centred curricula**

In this section, the theoretical background to the development of learner-centred language teaching is explored. We shall take a brief look at the theory and practice of adult learning before looking at the development of communicative language learning and teaching. The proficiency movement is also described. Finally, we shall look at the implications of a learner-centred philosophy for the language teacher. This provides the context for an examination of the nature of the curriculum and the various elements within a curriculum model which come into prominence when the curriculum is seen from a learner-centred perspective.

The theory and practice of adult learning or andragogy has had a long history. However, it is only comparatively recently that this theory and practice has been related to adult language learning. The most prominent theorist in the field of adult learning is Malcolm Knowles (1983), whose book, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, became very influential in adult learning circles.

Two other specialists in adult learning theory whose work has been influential in language teaching circles are Brundage and MacKeracher (1980). Their book, *Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Program Planning*, is regularly cited these days in the language teaching literature.

Some of the principles of adult learning identified by Brundage and MacKeracher are as follows:

- Adults who value their own experience as a resource for further learning or whose experience is valued by others are better learners.
- Adults learn best when they are involved in developing learning objectives for themselves which are congruent with their current and idealized self-concept.
- Adults have already developed organized ways of focusing on, taking in and processing information. These are referred to as cognitive style.
- The learner reacts to all experience as he perceives it, not as the teacher presents it.
- Adults enter into learning activities with an organized set of descriptions and feelings about themselves which influence the learning process.
- Adults are more concerned with whether they are changing in the direction of their own idealized self-concept than whether they are meeting objectives and standards set for them by others.
- Those adults who can process information through multiple channels and have learned 'how to learn' are the more productive learners.
- Adults learn best when the content is personally relevant to past experience or present concerns and the learning process is relevant to life experiences.
- Adults learn best when novel information is presented through a variety of sensory modes and experiences with sufficient repetitions and variations on themes to allow distinctions in patterns to emerge.

(Brundage and MacKeracher, 1980: 21–31)

The research surveyed by Brundage and MacKeracher in formulating their principles of adult learning indicates that adult learners are profoundly influenced by past learning experiences, present concerns and future prospects. They are less interested in learning for learning's sake than in learning to achieve some immediate or some not too far distant life goals. Translated to the field of language teaching, this suggests that a learner-centred rather than subject-centred approach is more likely to be consonant with the principles of adult learning. Adult learners are less likely to be interested in subscribing to the 'banking principle', that is in gaining mastery over subject matter or skills which may be useful at some far distant date, than in acquiring skills which can be put to immediate use. However, the empirical evidence on this is rather thin. What evidence we do have seems to suggest that adult learners vary markedly in their attitudes towards learning, their preferred learning styles and their perceptions of what is of value and what is not (Willing, 1985).

In his study of adult language learners, Brindley suggests that:

... one of the fundamental principles underlying the notion of permanent education is that education should develop in individuals the capacity to control their own destiny and that, therefore, the learner should be seen as being at the centre of the educational process. For the teaching institution and the teacher, this means that instructional programmes should be centred around the learners' needs and that learners themselves should exercise their own responsibility in the choice of learning objectives, content and methods as well as in determining the means used to assess their performance.

(Brindley, 1984: 15)

From his survey of the literature, Brindley concludes that adult learners are not merely passive recipients of subject matter devised by some educational authority, but have 'a wide experience of life which can be brought to bear in the learning process'. It is this belief among others which leads him to adopt a learner- rather than a subject-centred approach to the development of language curricula.

An important figure on the language curriculum landscape is Munby (1978). The Munby model, which was at first thought to hold great promise for language syllabus design, has come increasingly under criticism in the last few years and is now generally regarded as the core document in the narrow-band approach to needs-based course design. This narrow-band approach sees course design largely in terms of the specification of the 'what' of language teaching rather than the 'how'. The somewhat mechanical nature of the procedure for deriving course input and the atomistic approach to language specification and learning have been criticised as well. In fact, in some ways, the Munby model can be seen to be antithetical to the learner-centred philosophy from which it was supposed to be derived. Being based on data about the learner, rather than incorporating data from the learner, it could be argued that the model is only superficially learner-centred.

While the Munby model might be quite adequate for providing objective information or content specification, it fails to provide the sort of subjective information which is at the heart of the learner-centred procedures for curriculum design.

## **Communicative language teaching and learner-centred curricula**

A major impetus to the development of learner-centred language teaching came with the advent of communicative language teaching. In fact, this is more a cluster of approaches than a single methodology, which grew out of the dissatisfaction with structuralism and the situational methods of the 1960s. Its status was enhanced by the Council of Europe and some seminal documents have in fact stemmed from this body. Prominent among these are *Threshold Level English* by van Ek and Alexander (1980) and *Notional Syllabuses* by Wilkins (1976).

A great deal has been written in the last few years about the theory and practice of communicative language teaching. However, a basic principle underlying all communicative approaches is that learners must not only learn to make grammatically correct, propositional statements about the experiential world, but must also develop the ability to use language to get things done. These two aspects of language are captured in the distinction between the propositional and illocutionary (or functional) levels of language (Widdowson, 1978). It was recognised that simply being able to create grammatically correct structures in language did not necessarily enable the learners to use the language to carry out various real-world tasks. While the learners have to be able to construct grammatically correct structures (or reasonable approximations of target language structures), they also have to do much more. In working out what this 'much more' entails, linguists and sociolinguists began to explore the concept of the speech situation. In so doing they were able to articulate some of the ways in which language is likely to be influenced by situational variables. Among the

more important of these variables are the situation itself, the topic of conversation, the conversational purpose and, probably the most important of all, the relationship between interlocutors in an interaction. All of these interact in complex ways in communicative interaction.

As already indicated, early support for communicate language teaching came from the Council of Europe. Basically, the Council of Europe wanted to specify the sorts of things that language users might want to do with languages used within the European Community. Consequently, they were thinking of a specified group of adult learners using the languages of Europe to carry out specified tasks which included not only economic and business activities, but also recreational and tourist activities. It is important to be aware of this historical background because communicative approaches are currently used in many different contexts and situations, not all of which were intended by the original working party of the Council of Europe, and in consequence some Council of Europe perspectives may not be relevant.

According to Howatt, there is a strong and a weak version of communicative language teaching.

The weak version, which has become more or less standard practice in the last ten years, stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language teaching.

(Howatt, 1984: 279)

The strong version of communicative language teaching, however, sees language ability as being developed through activities which actually simulate target performance. In other words, class time should be spent not on language drills or controlled practice leading towards communicative language use, but in activities that require learners to do in class what they will have to do outside.

In recent years, it is the weak version which seems to have gained sway. Thus, we see teachers who adhere to a communicative view of language teaching also incorporating elements of structural practice and grammar teaching in their classroom. Littlewood is a proponent of the weak view of communicative language teaching.

The structural view of language has not been in any way superseded by the functional view. However, it is not sufficient on its own to account for how language is used as a means of communication. Let us take as an example a straightforward sentence such as 'Why don't you close the door?' From a structural viewpoint, it is unambiguously an interrogative. Different grammars may describe in different ways, but none could argue that its grammatical form is that of a declarative or an imperative. From a functional viewpoint, however, it is ambiguous. In different circumstances it may appear to function as a question – for example, the speaker may genuinely wish to know why his companion never closes a certain door. In others, it may function as a command.

(Littlewood, 1981: 1)



In fact this weak version has so successfully synthesised traditional and ‘communicative’ principles that it is debatable whether the term ‘communicative’ is still useful. (Few teachers these days would admit to teaching ‘non-communicatively’.)

In a useful survey of communicative language teaching, Quinn suggests that communicative approaches can be distinguished from traditional approaches to language pedagogy in a number of ways. These are set out in Table 1.1.

*Table 1.1* Characteristics of traditional and communicative approaches

<i>Traditional approaches</i>	<i>Communicative approaches</i>
1 <i>Focus on learning</i> Focus is on the language as a structured system of grammatical patterns.	Focus is on communication.
2 <i>How language items are selected</i> This is done on linguistics criteria alone.	This is done on the basis of what language items the learners need to know in order to get things done.
3 <i>How language items are sequenced</i> This is determined on linguistic grounds.	This is determined on other grounds, with the emphasis on content, meaning and interest.
4 <i>Degree of coverage</i> The aim is to cover the ‘whole picture’ of language structure by systematic linear progression.	The aim is to cover, in any particular phases, only what the learner needs and sees as important.
5 <i>View of language</i> A language is seen as a unified entity with fixed grammatical patterns as a core of basic words.	The variety of language is accepted, and seen as determined by the character of particular communicative contexts.
6 <i>Type of language used</i> Tends to be formal and bookish.	Genuine everyday language is emphasised.
7 <i>What is considered as a criterion of success</i> Aim is to have students produce formally correct sentences.	Aim is to have students communicate effectively and in a manner appropriate to the context they are working in.
8 <i>Which language skills are emphasised</i> Reading and writing.	Spoken interactions are regarded as at least as important as reading and writing.
9 <i>Teacher/student roles</i> Tends to be teacher-centred.	Is student-centred.
10 <i>Attitude to errors</i> Incorrect utterances are seen as deviations from the norms of standard grammar.	Partially correct and incomplete utterances are seen as such rather than just ‘wrong’.
11 <i>Similarity/dissimilarity to natural language learning</i> Reverses the natural language learning process by concentrating on the form of utterances rather than on the content.	Resembles the natural language learning process in that the content of the utterance is emphasised rather than the form.

Source: Adapted from Quinn (1984: 61–64).

## **Communicative language teaching – the teacher's perspective**

In this section, a study is reported which investigated the attitudes of teachers towards communicative language teaching. The point of departure for the study was an earlier investigation into the methodological practices of foreign language teachers by Swaffar, Arens and Morgan (1982).

### **Background**

The study by Swaffar, Arens and Morgan was designed to test the salience for foreign language teachers of the distinction between rationalist and empiricist approaches to language learning. Results indicated that the methodological debate which has assumed great prominence during the 1960s and 1970s and which resulted in a number of large-scale though inconclusive studies may have been based on false assumptions about the salience of different methodological practices for classroom teachers. Swaffar et al. concluded from their investigations that

Methodological labels assigned to teaching activities are, in themselves, not informative, because they refer to a pool of classroom practices which are universally used.

(Swaffar, Arens and Morgan, 1982: 31)

Given the prominence of communicative language teaching in the literature, a study was designed to investigate the salience of 'communicative' as opposed to 'traditional' practices for second language teachers.

### **The study**

Following Quinn (1984) a survey instrument was constructed which consisted of statements typifying either 'traditional' or 'communicative' practices. There were also two buffer questions. Teachers were asked to rate each statement according to a five point scale. (This was adapted from the Swaffar et al. [1982] study.) The instrument is reproduced as Table 1.2.

Subjects for the study were 60 full-time and part-time teachers with the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP). The AMEP is one of the largest single-language programmes in the world, with annual enrolments in excess of 120,000, and over 1,500 teachers. Learning arrangements and course types vary greatly, from full-time intensive to part-time courses. Programme delivery occurs through face-to-face teaching, self-access and individualised learning courses, a distance education programme and a home tutor scheme. The AMEP receives its funding and policy directives from the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, while the administration and delivery of courses is managed by eight State and Territory educational bodies.

While all those taking part in the survey described below were concerned with the teaching of English to adult immigrants, they came from all parts of the Program and had a wide range of experience. The teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire in Table 1.2 during the course of an in-service workshop.

*Table 1.2* Survey questionnaire on ‘traditional’ and ‘communicative’ activities

Instructions:

Please rate each of the statements according to the following key:

- 1 Virtual non-use. This principle or activity forms little or no part of my teaching methodology.
  - 2 Trivial, incidental use. This principle or activity forms a limited part of what I do, but I tend to reject its use more than I favour its use. Somewhat disagree with use.
  - 3 Neutral.
  - 4 Important supplementary use. This principle forms an important supplementary part of my teaching. Somewhat agree with use.
  - 5 Essential use. This is essential to what I do, and it forms an essential part of my practice. Use or agree with its use.
- 
- ☐ 1 Drills involving manipulation of formal aspects of the language system are used.
  - ☐ 2 The development of fluency is more important than formal accuracy.
  - ☐ 3 Activities focus on whole-task rather than part-skills practice.
  - ☐ 4 Comprehension activities precede activities requiring production.
  - ☐ 5 ‘Grammar’ is explicitly taught.
  - ☐ 6 Learner errors are corrected.
  - ☐ 7 Activities are selected because they are interesting/enjoyable rather than because they relate to course objectives.
  - ☐ 8 Activities are derived in consultation with the learner.
  - ☐ 9 Activities are developed which require the learner to simulate, in class, behaviours needed to communicate outside class.

Comments:

The workshop was not concerned with communicative methodology, so the subjects were not ‘primed’ to respond to the items on the questionnaire in a particular way.

## Results

Each item in the survey form was rated according to the mean score, and an appropriate designation given. Ratings and item types are indicated in Table 1.3.

*Table 1.3* Ratings for items according to mean scores

<i>Item</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Rating</i>
1	Traditional	Trivial, incidental use
2	Communicative	Essential use
3	Communicative	Important supplementary use
4	Communicative	Important supplementary use
5	Traditional	Trivial, incidental use
6	Traditional	Trivial, incidental use
7	Buffer	Trivial, incidental use
8	Buffer	Trivial, incidental use
9	Communicative	Essential use

## **Discussion**

The results demonstrate quite clearly that, for the group of teachers surveyed, the concept of 'communicative language teaching' is salient, with the three non-communicative and one of the buffer statements being accorded 'trivial incidental use'. While these results might, on the surface, appear to conflict with those obtained by Swaffar et al., it is important not to read too much into them. In the first place, the study was designed to determine only what teachers said they did. It should not be assumed that their actual classroom practice followed these principles. (While this comment might seem to imply dishonesty or lack of awareness on the part of teachers, there is evidence that teachers do not, in fact, always do what they say or think they do.)

Another point which needs to be made and which could call into question the results is the fact that many of the teachers who commented on the survey criticised the use of questionnaires for data collection purposes. Most of them wanted to qualify their responses in some way; a significant number stated that the response they gave would depend upon and could vary according to the type of students they had. Disquiet at the use of questionnaires for data collection purposes was also reported in a number of other studies carried out within the AMEP. It seems that, in general, teachers are loath to give unequivocal responses on matters relating to professional practice. The buffer statement which rated well (8) relates to the learner-centred view of involving learners in selecting activities.

In developing a learner-centred philosophy for the AMEP, Ingram stated that:

Rather than being an arbitrary academic exercise, the course followed should be responsive to the learner's needs emanating from his stage of language development and his personal interests and aspirations. Thence, it must capitalize on the learner's natural and acquired learning strategies and ensure, through continuing involvement, that any barrier between the learner and the Australian community is bridged and any sense of undesirable alienation is reduced.

(Ingram, 1981: 4)

More recently, Brindley (1984) has built on the work of Ingram and others. After surveying the literature, he provides a blueprint and framework for introducing learner-centred principles into adult ESL.

## **The concept of language proficiency**

It is generally considered desirable for language curricula to contain explicit statements about the nature of language and language learning. While some assumptions about these concepts are inherent in any curriculum, they are not always explicitly stated. This lack of explication may well be due to a lack of certainty on the part of theoretical and applied linguists. There is certainly no widespread agreement within the profession about the nature of language and learning.

This confusion can be seen in relation to the concept of language proficiency. Not only is there confusion about concepts, linguists seem incapable of agreeing on terminology. From an inspection of the literature, one quickly

comes to the conclusion that linguists are obsessed with conceptual universes in which creatures come in pairs. Thus, we have 'langue' and 'parole', 'competence' and 'performance', 'use' and 'usage', 'form' and 'meaning', 'context' and 'cotext', 'cohesion' and 'coherence'. It was Chomsky (1965) who drew attention to the competence–performance distinction (although the theoretical distinction between the two terms was not Chomsky's). For Chomsky, 'competence' refers to mastery of the principles governing language behaviour. 'Performance' refers to the manifestation of these internalised rules in actual language use. The terms have come to be used to refer to what a person knows about a language (competence) and what a person does (performance). More recently the term 'communicative competence' has gained currency. This refers to knowledge of the rules of use and appropriateness and includes linguistic competence. While this might seem reasonably straightforward, there are a number of complicating factors. To begin with, there is nothing like universal agreement on what is meant by 'knowing'. Does 'knowing the rules of language' mean being able to recite them? If so, most native speakers must be classed as incompetent. According to Chomsky, however, native speakers are, by definition, competent.

Diller suggests:

Linguists are sometimes hesitant to suggest that ordinary people 'know' the rules of their language, because linguists themselves have such a hard time trying to formulate these rules explicitly.

(Diller, 1979: 26)

He points out that children can formulate phonological rules for nonsense words through a process of analogy, although they are unable to give a formulation for these rules. He goes on to ask:

But if children are not able to formulate the rules of grammar which they use, in what sense can we say they 'know' these rules? This is the question which has bothered linguists. The answer is that they know these rules in a functional way, in a way which relates the changes in abstract grammatical structure to changes in meaning. Knowledge does not always have to be formulated. Children can use tools before they learn the names for these tools.

(op. cit.: 26–27)

For Diller, then, knowledge need not be conscious but may manifest itself in the ability to use language. However, this would seem to render the competence–performance distinction rather uncertain.

Krashen (1981, 1982) further confounds the issue by suggesting that knowledge of linguistic rules is the outward manifestation of another construct (acquisition). Rea (1985) has since questioned the need for a 'competence' construct by suggesting that as we can observe only instances of performance, not competence, the competence–performance distinction is redundant. She brings this view into line with communicative language teaching by proposing yet another bifurcation: communicative performance and non-communicative performance.

It would seem, therefore, that we have reached a point where linguistic knowledge is to be defined in terms of what an individual is able to do with that knowledge. This is reinforced by a recent movement in ESL in the United

States: competency-based ESL. As though there were not enough confusion over terminology, this movement is using 'competence' to refer to things that learners can do with language: that is, it is used in roughly the same sense as 'performance' in the earlier competence–performance distinction. The concept of competency-based education (CBE) has been brought in to ESL from the field of adult education where it is used to specify the skills needed by adults to function in today's society in areas such as communication, computation, problem-solving, and interpersonal relationships.

In ESL, 'a competency is a task-oriented goal written in terms of behavioral objectives' (CAL, 1983: 9). The following characteristics of CBE as it relates to ESL have been articulated:

Teaching ESL to competencies requires the instructional focus to be on functional competencies and life-coping skills. It is not what the students know about language but what they do with the language.

Assessment is built in. Once the competency has been identified, it also serves as a means of evaluating student performance. Since it is performance based, assessment rests on whether the student can perform the competency or not. The only problem is to establish the level at which the student can perform the competency. Competencies are based on the assessment of student needs.

(op. cit.: 12–13)

Within the literature, some writers use the term 'proficiency' as an alternative to 'competency' (see, for example, Higgs, 1984). Richards, on the other hand, makes a clear distinction between 'competence' and 'proficiency', although he characterises the concept of proficiency in the same way as CBE characterises competency. This can be seen in the following quote.

- 1 When we speak of proficiency, we are not referring to knowledge of a language, that is, to abstract, mental and unobservable abilities. We are referring to performance, or, that is, to observable or measurable behaviour. Whereas competence refers to what we know about the rules of use and the rules of speaking of a language, proficiency refers to how well we can use such rules in communication.
- 2 Proficiency is always described in terms of real-world tasks, being defined with reference to specific situations, settings, purposes, activities and so on.
- 3 In encapsulating the notion of skill, proficiency statements must always include a criterion.
- 4 It is assumed that proficiency in a given linguistic task involves the incorporation of a number of sub-skills or sub-tasks.

Richards goes on to say:

A proficiency-oriented language curriculum is not one which sets out to teach learners linguistic or communicative competence, since these are merely abstractions or idealisations: rather, it is organised around the particular kind of communicative tasks the learners need to master and the skills and behaviours needed to accomplish them. The goal of a proficiency-based

curriculum is not to provide opportunities for the learners to 'acquire' the target language: it is to enable the learners to develop the skills needed to use language for specific purposes.

(Richards, 1985: 5)

The foregoing discussion demonstrates the confusion surrounding a number of key concepts relating to the nature of language. This confusion is due partly to the inconsistent application of terms to concepts and partly to confusion over the nature of the concepts themselves.

If the Richards line is followed, proficiency, simply put, refers to the ability to perform real-world tasks with a pre-specified degree of skill. For the moment, we shall accept this definition, although it must be pointed out that problems arise when the concept is probed a little more rigorously. Later, we shall see that the psychological reality of the construct 'proficiency' is itself problematic.

### **Towards a generalised language curriculum framework**

In a recent study of curriculum processes, Bartlett and Butler (1985) propose a generalised curriculum framework which sets out five interdependent but distinct categories. They call these categories the 'designed' curriculum, the 'developed' curriculum, the 'enacted' curriculum, the 'received' curriculum and the 'assessed' curriculum. The designed curriculum contains a statement of general philosophy and policy guiding the curriculum. The developed curriculum consists of materials and the articulation of processes which are meant to operationalise the designed curriculum. The enacted curriculum consists of all the transactions between teachers and learners which are based on the materials and learning processes derived from the developed curriculum. The received curriculum represents the outcomes of the curriculum process (what the students actually learn).

It is often assumed that there exists a one-to-one relationship between the planned, implemented and assessed curriculum. In other words, it has been assumed that what is planned will be what gets taught, and that what gets taught will be what is learned. This assumption grossly oversimplifies what is, in fact, an extremely complex set of processes.

The assumption has been criticised by Parlett and Hamilton in the following way:

An instructional system, when it is adopted, undergoes modifications that are rarely trivial. The instructional system may remain as a shared idea, abstract model, slogan or shorthand, but it assumes a different form in every situation. Its constituent elements are emphasised or de-emphasised, expanded or truncated, as teachers, administrators, technicians and students interpret and reinterpret the instructional system for their particular setting. In practice, objectives are commonly reordered, redefined, abandoned or forgotten.

(Parlett and Hamilton, 1983: 14)

By assuming that 'planning equals teaching equals learning', curriculum designers have focused on the planned and, to a certain extent, the assessed curriculum, and have tended to ignore the implemented curriculum. It is only

fairly recently that the balance has started to be redressed, and that curriculum designers have become interested in classroom-based research. Such research is beginning to reveal to us the complexities of the curriculum in action.

## **The teacher and the curriculum**

The Bartlett and Butler study introduced in the preceding section investigates the attempt to develop a learner-centred curriculum model at a national level. In order to capture the complexities of the processes set in train by the decision to embrace a learner-centred philosophy, Bartlett and Butler find it necessary to add a new element which they call the negotiated curriculum. This negotiated curriculum refers to those curriculum activities which involve negotiation and consultation between teachers and students. It includes such processes as needs analysis, jointly conducted goal and objective setting exercises by teachers and learners, negotiation of preferred methodology, materials and learning activities, and the sharing of evaluation and self-evaluation procedures.

The research questions which Bartlett and Butler set out to explore are as follows:

- How are Adult Migrant Education Programs selected and arranged?
- How are curriculum decisions made and implemented in the AMEP?
- What support structures are available to personnel in the AMEP?
- How is a needs-based approach to curriculum planning enacted in the classroom?

Data for the study were drawn from a number of diverse sources which included documents, interview data, telephone consultancy data and data collected through the distribution of a questionnaire. Results of the data were ordered into an eight (States and Territories) by six (learning arrangements) by three (levels of decision making – national, state, local) matrix.

As a result of their study, Bartlett and Butler concluded that the learner-centred curriculum created a great deal of stress, that teachers were required to have a range of new skills if the ideals of the learner-centred curriculum were to become a reality, and that teachers required assistance and support in a number of areas. In particular, they concluded that assistance was required in the following areas:

Needs assessment skills. The teachers require instruments and processes by which they can efficiently gather and prioritise student needs.

Course guidelines. Teachers are asking for a broad framework within which they can negotiate the curriculum. They need to know what the students have done before and what will come after – in a form that does not stifle the negotiated curriculum.

Course planning skills. The teachers are asking for planning skills that help them to negotiate a coherent, achievable set of objectives for a course, and then to plan a sequence of lessons to assist the students to attain the objectives.

Bilingual help in negotiating the curriculum. The information exchange that is so crucial to the negotiated curriculum requires bilingual assistance in many classes.



Continuity in the Program. The needs-based model can easily give rise to a fragmented program. Some teachers are caught in this bind and are asking for some form of program management so they feel that their students are on a direct path to their goals.

Educational counselling. In a needs-based model the size of the problem that confronts any individual teacher is directly related to the range and diversity of student needs. Teachers report that the negotiated curriculum becomes an impossible project if the student needs are very divergent. This is a key area where the teacher stress in negotiating the curriculum can be reduced – by forming a class group with a narrow range of needs. This requires the most efficacious use of educational counsellors, people who may themselves be curriculum developers, and who can direct students on a continuing basis into groups that match their needs.

Conflict resolution. The opening up of the curriculum to negotiation will inevitably lead to some instances of conflict. The teachers reported in a survey that such conflict had arisen and many teachers had found suitable processes for resolving it.

Teacher role specifications. The task of continually negotiating the curriculum with the students puts enormous strain on the teachers as is clearly evident in the study.

(op. cit.: 112–113)

One of the issues raised by the Bartlett and Butler study, and, indeed, an issue underlying the adoption of a learner-centred approach to curriculum development with its implication of a greater professional burden on the classroom teacher, is the extent to which teachers see themselves as being responsible for the range of curriculum processes and activities that have been articulated in the preceding pages. In order to obtain supplementary evidence to that produced by Bartlett and Butler, a survey was conducted of 35 teachers from a range of centre-based programmes in the Adult Migrant Education Program. The aim of the survey was to determine who, in the eyes of a representative group of teachers, should be principally responsible for carrying out initial and ongoing needs analysis, goal and objective setting, selecting and grading content, grouping learners, devising learning activities, instructing learners, monitoring and assessing learner progress, and course evaluation.

### ***The study***

Data were collected through the distribution of the survey form in Table 1.4.

### ***Results***

Rankings, from most to least important, for each of the curriculum tasks are set out in Table 1.5.

These data show quite clearly that the teachers surveyed saw themselves as having primary responsibility for all of the curriculum tasks except that of grouping learners. This reflects the fact that most teachers are simply not involved in the grouping process, which is unfortunate, as devising appropriate groupings is one of the keys to successful learner-centred curriculum development.

Table 1.4 Responsibility for curriculum tasks survey form

Indicate by giving a rating from 1 to 6 (1 = most important) who, in your opinion, should be primarily responsible for carrying out the following curriculum tasks. Give a rating, from 1 to 6, for each curriculum task.

*Key*

- A Counsellor
- B Bilingual resource person
- C Curriculum advisor
- D Teacher-in-charge of centre or programme
- E Classroom teacher
- F Outside curriculum specialist

<i>Curriculum process</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>
Initial needs analysis						
Goal and objective setting						
Selecting/grading content						
Ongoing needs analysis						
Grouping learners						
Devising learning activities						
Instructing learners						
Monitoring and assessing progress						
Course evaluation						

Table 1.5 Results of survey

*Initial needs analysis*

- Classroom teacher
- Bilingual resource person
- Teacher-in-charge
- Counsellor
- Curriculum advisor
- Outside curriculum specialist

*Goal and objective setting*

- Classroom teacher
- Curriculum advisor
- Teacher-in-charge
- Counsellor
- Bilingual resource person
- Outside curriculum specialist

*Selecting/grading content*

- Classroom teacher
- Curriculum advisor
- Teacher-in-charge
- Bilingual resource person
- Counsellor
- Outside curriculum specialist

*Ongoing needs analysis*

- Classroom teacher
- Teacher-in-charge
- Bilingual resource person
- Counsellor

Table 1.5 continued

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Curriculum advisor  
Outside curriculum specialist

*Grouping learners*

Teacher-in-charge  
Classroom teacher  
Counsellor  
Curriculum advisor  
Bilingual resource person  
Outside curriculum specialist

*Devising learning activities*

Classroom teacher  
Curriculum advisor  
Outside curriculum specialist  
Teacher-in-charge  
Bilingual resource person  
Counsellor

*Instructing learners*

Classroom teacher  
Bilingual resource person  
Outside curriculum specialist  
Curriculum advisor  
Teacher-in-charge  
Counsellor

*Monitoring and assessing progress*

Classroom teacher  
Teacher-in-charge  
Counsellor  
Curriculum advisor  
Bilingual resource person  
Outside curriculum specialist

*Course evaluation*

Classroom teacher  
Teacher-in-charge  
Curriculum advisor  
Outside curriculum specialist  
Bilingual resource person  
Counsellor

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The most important individuals, after the classroom teacher, were seen as the teacher-in-charge and centre-based curriculum advisor. The scepticism of the classroom teacher towards outside curriculum specialists is evident from the generally low ranking given to such a person for most of the curriculum tasks.

It should be pointed out that the teachers who took part in the survey, unlike some others within the Adult Migrant Education Program, do not have access either to counsellors or to bilingual resource persons, which may account for the comparatively low rankings given to them for some of the tasks. The fact that curriculum advisors did rather well, despite the fact that teachers did not have

access to such personnel either, suggests that the teachers perceive the need for 'on the ground' assistance in the curriculum area.

## Summary

In this chapter, we have examined some of the theoretical and empirical foundations of a learner-centred approach to language curriculum development. These include theories of adult learning, communicative language teaching and the concept of language proficiency.

The chapter reports on three recent empirical investigations of teacher attitudes towards curriculum planning and communicative language teaching. For the group of teachers investigated, the concept of communicative language teaching is a salient one. The Bartlett and Butler study demonstrates some of the practical difficulties of developing a learner-centred model and indicates that teachers have accepted, in principle, the centrality of their place within an extended curriculum model.

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## CHAPTER 2

# COMMUNICATIVE TASKS AND THE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

This chapter was written for the special 25th anniversary issue of *TESOL Quarterly*. It looks at the theoretical and empirical bases of task-based language teaching, and spells out some of the practical, curricular implications of TBLT.

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### Abstract

Over the last 25 years the communicative task has emerged as a significant building block in the development of language curricula and also as an element for motivating process-oriented second language acquisition (SLA) research. This paper reviews the influence of the communicative task on curriculum development and summarizes the research base for task-based language teaching. In the final part of the paper, an agenda for future research is set out.

### Introduction

Over the last 25 years, the communicative task has evolved as an important component within curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation. In task-based language teaching, syllabus content and instructional processes are selected with reference to the communicative tasks which learners will (either actually or potentially) need to engage in outside the classroom and also with reference to theoretical and empirical insights into those social and psycholinguistic processes which facilitate language acquisition. This approach to language teaching is characterized by the following features:

- 1 An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language
- 2 The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation
- 3 The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself

- 4 An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning
- 5 An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom

Task-based language teaching has been an important addition to the conceptual and empirical repertoire of the second and foreign language teacher in the eighties, having influenced syllabus design, materials development, and language teaching methodology. In this paper, I shall review the development of task-based language teaching (TBLT). In the first part of the paper, I shall provide an account of the theoretical and empirical basis for TBLT. I shall then discuss the influence of TBLT on curriculum development and classroom practice. In the final part of the paper, I indicate the ways in which I believe that the research agenda should be extended in the nineties.

### **The conceptual basis**

Like many other innovations, task-based teaching entered the language field from the educational mainstream. Studies of teachers at work demonstrated that, while teacher education programmes taught trainees to plan, implement, and evaluate their programmes according to the 'rational' model which begins with objectives and moves through tasks to evaluation (Tyler, 1949), the reality was that, once they began practising, teachers tended to focus on pedagogic tasks (Shavelson and Stern, 1981). This insight from research into teachers' professional planning and decision-making processes enhanced the status of task as a curriculum planning tool.

Task-based learning is also linked to mainstream education by its close relationship with experiential learning. This relationship is evident in the following description of experiential learning:

In experiential learning, immediate personal experience is seen as the focal point for learning, giving 'life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process', as pointed out by David Kolb (1984: 21). But experience also needs to be processed consciously by reflecting on it. Learning is thus seen as a cyclical process integrating immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and action.

(Kohonen, 1992)

To date, definitions of tasks have been rather programmatic. Long (1985a) suggests that a task is nothing more or less than the things people do in everyday life. He cites as examples buying shoes, making reservations, finding destinations, and writing cheques. The *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* provides a more pedagogically oriented characterization. Here, it is suggested that a task is:

any activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e., as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command may be referred to as tasks.

(Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985: 89)

The value of tasks, according to the authors, is that they provide a purpose for the activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.

A similar characterization is offered by Breen (1987: 23), who suggests that a task is:

any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning – from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision making.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that tasks can be conceptualized in terms of the curricular goals they are intended to serve, the input data which forms the point of departure for the task, and the activities or procedures which the learners undertake in the completion of the task. Two important additional elements are the roles for teachers and learners implicit in the task, and the settings and conditions under which the task takes place (Nunan, 1989). Later in this paper, I shall use these elements of goals, input data, activities/procedures, roles, and settings as rubrics for synthesizing the considerable amount of research activity which provides an empirical basis for task-based language teaching and learning.

## **The curricular basis**

Before the development of communicative approaches to language teaching, tasks and exercises were selected as a second order activity, after the specification of the morphosyntactic, phonological, and lexical elements to be taught. Traditionally, curriculum designers and materials writers took as their point of departure the question, What are the grammatical, phonological, and lexical items to be taught? The specification of these items set the parameters for the selection of classroom activities. In other words, selection of classroom activities was driven by curriculum goals specified in phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical terms. (See, for example, the analysis of content selection and sequencing in a grammar-based syllabus provided by McDonough, 1981: 21.)

In a task-based curriculum, the decision-making process is quite different. There are, in fact, two different routes which the curriculum developer/materials writer can take in initiating the design process. The first of these is based on what I have called a rehearsal rationale. Here the question initiating the design process is, What is it that learners potentially or actually need to do with the target language? The second is what I have called the psycholinguistic rationale. Here the initiating question is, What are the psycholinguistic mechanisms underlying second language acquisition, and how can these be activated in the classroom? The linguistic elements to be focused on in the classroom are selected as a second order activity.

Ideally, task selection should occur with reference both to target task rationale and to psycholinguistic principles. The way that this might be achieved is illustrated in the procedure set out in Table 2.1, adapted from a recently published task-based coursebook (Nunan and Lockwood, 1991). The pedagogic task is selected with reference to the real-world or target task of 'giving information



Table 2.1 Steps involved in the development of a pedagogic task

<i>Procedure</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
1 Identify target task	Giving personal information in a job interview	To give learners the opportunity to develop language skills relevant to their real-world needs
2 Provide model	Students listen to and extract key information from authentic/simulated interview	To provide learners with the opportunity to listen to and analyse ways in which native speakers or users of the target language carry out the target task
3 Identify enabling skill	Manipulation drill to practice wh- questions with do-insertion	To provide learners with explicit instruction and guided practice in those grammatical elements needed to perform the target task
4 Devise pedagogic task	Interview simulation using role cards	To provide learners with the opportunity to mobilize their emerging language skills through rehearsal

in a job interview'. Learners are given a model of the target language behaviour, as well as specific practice in manipulating key language items. The actual pedagogic task, a simulation, is also consistent with research on the facilitative effects of classroom interaction (research on language acquisition is reviewed in the next section).

The growing importance of the pedagogic task as a central element within the curriculum has called into question the conventional distinction between syllabus design and methodology. Traditionally, syllabus design is concerned with the selection and grading of content, while methodology is concerned with the selection and sequencing of tasks, exercises, and related classroom activities. Metaphorically speaking, syllabus design is concerned with the destination, while methodology is concerned with the route. With the development of task-based approaches to language learning and teaching, this distinction has become difficult to sustain. Breen (1984) has neatly captured this change of focus in the following way:

[TBLT would] prioritize the route itself; a focusing upon the means towards the learning of a new language. Here the designer would give priority to the changing process of learning and the potential of the classroom – to the psychological and social resources applied to a new language by learners in the classroom context . . . a greater concern with capacity for communication rather than repertoire of communication, with the activity of learning a language viewed as important as the language itself, and with a focus upon means rather than predetermined objectives, all indicate priority of process over content.

(Breen, 1984: 52–53)

Conceptually, then, task-based language teaching has been influenced by developments in mainstream education as well as by major conceptual shifts in our understanding of the nature of language and language learning. It has also been enhanced by a research agenda which has provided an empirical basis upon

which curriculum designers, materials writers, and classroom practitioners can draw. The availability of empirical data on tasks has enhanced the status of task-based language teaching at a time when the various 'methods' approaches to language teaching have come under increasing criticism for lacking an empirical basis. (See, for example, Long, 1990; Richards, 1990.) In the next section, I shall provide a selective review of this research.

## **The empirical basis**

One of the strengths of task-based language teaching is that the conceptual basis is supported by a strong empirical tradition. This distinguishes it from most methods approaches to pedagogy, which are relatively data-free. I have already suggested that tasks can be conceptualized in terms of the key elements of goals, input data, activities/procedures, roles, and settings. This conceptual scheme provides a convenient means of synthesizing the research on tasks.

Task goals enable the programme planner and materials writer to provide explicit links between the task and the broader curriculum it is designed to serve. Without clearly articulated sets of goal statements, there is a risk that task-based teaching programmes will lack coherence, as Widdowson (1987), among others, has pointed out. Goals are generally referenced against the sorts of things learners want to do with the language outside the classroom. Typical goal statements include:

- 1 To develop the skills necessary to take part in academic study
- 2 To obtain sufficient oral and written skills to obtain a promotion from unskilled worker to site supervisor
- 3 To communicate socially in the target language
- 4 To develop the survival skills necessary to obtain goods and services
- 5 To be able to read the literature of the target culture

Despite its importance for coherent curriculum development, compared to other areas, research on task goals is difficult to find in the literature. One of the few available studies is that by Brindley (1984), who investigated the needs analysis, goal and objective setting practices of teachers of ESL to adults, and the reaction of learners to these practices. Based on an extensive series of interviews, Brindley found that programmes in which the goals were explicit and reflected the communicative needs of the learners had greater face validity than those in which the goals were either unstated or implicit, or which did not reflect learners' goals. While there was no direct evidence that programmes with explicit, relevant goals resulted in more effective learning outcomes, it is not unreasonable to expect that this would be the case, given what we know about the relationship between affective/attitudinal factors and learning outcomes.

Most tasks take as their point of departure input data of some sort. Such data may be linguistic (that is, reading and listening texts of various sorts) or non-linguistic (for example, diagrams, photographs, picture sequences). This area is considerably better researched than that of goals. A key question underlying research on input tasks is, What factors are implicated in the difficulty of aural and written texts?

In a large-scale investigation of the listening comprehension of secondary students, Brown and Yule (1983) found that two factors significantly affected the

difficulty of listening texts. The first factor related to the number of elements in the text and the ease and difficulty of distinguishing between them. The second significant factor was the text type. All other things being equal, descriptions were easier than instructions, which were easier than stories. Arguments or opinion-expressing texts containing abstract concepts and relationships were the most difficult. Follow-up research cited in Anderson and Lynch (1988) identified a number of other factors, including the following:

- 1 The way the information is organized (narrative texts in which the order of events in the texts mirrors the order in which the events actually occurred in real life are easier to comprehend than narratives in which the events are presented out of sequence)
- 2 The familiarity of the topic
- 3 The explicitness and sufficiency of the information
- 4 The type of referring expressions (for young children, pronominal referents are more difficult to comprehend than full noun phrase referents)
- 5 Text type

In the area of reading comprehension, Nunan (1984) found that similar elements were implicated in the difficulty of school texts for secondary level students. Nunan looked, among other things, at the difficulty of different types of textual relationships as well as at the effect of content familiarity. He found that logical relationships of the type marked by conjunctions were more difficult than referential and lexical relationships. He also found that content familiarity was more significant than grammatical complexity in determining the difficulty of reading texts.

The bulk of task-based research has focused on the activities or procedures which learners carry out in relation to the input data. The key question here has been, What tasks seem to be most helpful in facilitating second language acquisition?

In the first of a series of investigations into learner-learner interaction, Long (1981) found that two-way tasks (in which all students in a group discussion had unique information to contribute) stimulated significantly more modified interactions than one-way tasks (that is, in which one member of the group possessed all the relevant information). Similarly, Doughty and Pica (1986) found that required information-exchange tasks generated significantly more modified interaction than tasks in which the exchange of information was optional. (Modified interactions are those instances in which speakers modify their language in order to ensure that they have been correctly understood; they result from an indication of non-comprehension usually on the part of a listener.)

These investigations of modified interaction were theoretically motivated by Krashen's (1981, 1982) hypothesis that comprehensible input was a necessary and sufficient condition for second language acquisition – in other words, that acquisition would occur when learners understood messages in the target language. Long (1985b) advanced the following argument in favour of tasks which promote conversational adjustments or interactional modifications on the part of the learners taking part in the task:

Step 1: Show that (a) linguistic/conversational adjustments promote (b) comprehensible input.

Step 2: Show that (b) comprehensible input promotes (c) acquisition.

Step 3: Deduce that (a) linguistic/conversational adjustments promote (c) acquisition.

Satisfactory evidence of the a-b-c relationships would allow the linguistic environment to be posited as an indirect causal variable in SLA. (The relationship would be indirect because of the intervening 'comprehension' variable [p. 378].) In the last few years the comprehensible input hypothesis has been criticized on theoretical and empirical grounds. For example, Swain (1985) demonstrated that immersion programmes in Canada, in which learners received huge amounts of comprehensible input, did not lead to the sort of native-like facility in the target language predicted by the input hypothesis. She proposed that, in addition to comprehensible input, learners need opportunities to produce comprehensible output because it is only through such opportunities that learners are pushed to mobilize their emerging grammatical competence. (Such mobilization is precisely what the tasks suggested by Long, 1985b, Doughty and Pica, 1986, and others manage to achieve. In other words, their research may be justified on grounds other than that proposed by the comprehensible input hypothesis.)

More recently, attention has focused on the types of language and discourse patterns stimulated by different task types. Berwick (1988, 1993) investigated the different types of language stimulated by transactional and interpersonal tasks. (A transaction task is one in which communication occurs principally to bring about the exchange of goods and services, whereas an interpersonal task is one in which communication occurs largely for social purposes.) He found that the different functional purposes stimulated different morphosyntactic realizations.

In a recent study, I investigated the different interactional patterns stimulated by open and closed tasks. (An open task is one in which there is no single correct answer, while a closed task is one in which there is a single correct answer or a restricted number of correct answers.) It was found that the different task types stimulated very different interactional patterns. This can be seen in the following extracts. In Task A, the relatively closed task, the students are required to sort 20 vocabulary cards into semantic fields. In Task B, having read a text on the topic of habits, the students are required to have an open-ended discussion on the topic of bad habits. (Both extracts are adapted from Nunan, 1991.)

### **Extract from Task A**

Two students, Hilda and Carlos, are studying the following words which have been typed on to pieces of cardboard. Their task is to group the words together in a way which makes sense to them. There is silence for several minutes as the students study the cards:

GEOGRAPHY, ASTRONOMY, AGRICULTURE, ECONOMICS, COMMERCE, ENGLISH, SCIENCE, STATISTICS, BOOK, COMPUTER, PENCIL, DIARY, NEWSPAPER, MAGAZINE, THAILAND, HONG KONG, MELBOURNE, DARWIN, UNITED STATES, ASIAN, DIAGRAM, ILLUSTRATION, PICTURE, CARTOON, VIDEO, COMPETENT, LAZY, INTERESTING, SUPERIOR, UNCOMFORTABLE, REGION.

*H:* Statistic and diagram – they go together. You know diagram?

*C:* Yeah.

*H:* Diagram and statistic are family . . . but maybe, I think, statistic and diagram – you think we can put in science? Or maybe . . .

*C:* Science, astronomy, (yeah) and, er, can be agriculture.

*H:* Agriculture's not a science.

*C:* Yes, it's similar,

*H:* No . . . er, maybe Darwin and science . . .

*C:* What's the Darwin?

*H:* Darwin is a man.

*C:* No, it's one of place in Australia.

*H:* Yes, but it's a man who discover something, yes, I'm sure.

*C:* OK.

*H:* And maybe, look, yes, picture, newspaper, magazine, cartoon, book, illustration.

*C:* (Yeah.) Maybe we can put lazy and English together. Er, Hong Kong, Thailand together. Asian. Er, United States. Diary with picture, newspaper and so on. . . . Oh, I understand, look, look. Here, it's only adjective – lazy, competent, interesting, and comfortable. Er, what is it? Ah, yes, yes. (She begins to rearrange the cards.)

*C:* Darwin.

### **Extract from Task B**

Maria, Martha, Sylvia, and Sandy are taking part in a small-group discussion on the topic of bad habits.

*Maria:* My next door neighbour . . . he make, eh, very noisy, very noisy (yeah). I can't tell him because he's very good people. (The discussion continues for several minutes.)

*Sylvia:* . . . you don't want to say anything because you might get upset, of course. Me do the same thing because I've got neighbours in my place and always you know do something I don't like it but I don't like to say because I think maybe, you know, make him upset or . . .

*Martha:* I've got bad neighbour but I feel embarrass . . .

*Sylvia:* . . . to say something, of course, like everyone . . .

*Martha:* They always come in and see what I'm doing – who's coming. (No good.) (Yeah, that's no good.) They want to check everything. If they see I buy something from the market they expect me to give them some. (Oh, yeah.) (Oh, that's not nice.) But I . . . it's difficult.

*Sylvia:* It's a difficult, yeah, but sometime it's difficult . . .

*Martha:* They can't understand, I bought them and I gave money. (laughter) (Yeah.)

*Martha:* You know sometime difficult to the people because sometime I can't speak the proper, the language, and little bit hard to give to understand . . . and that's – sometime feel embarrass then, I can't say it, you know?

*Maria:* (turns to the fifth woman, who has not yet spoken) Sarah, you tell. (You tell now.)

*Sarah:* My, er, for example, my sister-in-law she all the time snores in her sleep. (Oh, yes.) And my brother say, 'Oh, I'm sorry, we must sleep separate.' (Separate beds.) (laughter) They did. (Good idea.) A good idea because he couldn't sleep. (laughter)

In addition to the fact that the different task types stimulated different interactional patterns, the research also indicated that some task types might be more appropriate than others for learners at particular levels of proficiency. In the above study, it was found that, with lower-intermediate to intermediate learners, the relatively closed tasks stimulated more modified interaction than relatively more open tasks. This is not to say that such students should engage in closed tasks to the exclusion of open tasks. The important thing is that programme planners and teachers should select a mix of tasks to reflect the pedagogic goals of the curriculum.

Another element considered within task design is that of teacher/learner roles. All pedagogic tasks contain roles for teachers and learners, and conflict is likely to occur if there is a misapprehension between teachers and learners about their respective roles. Research related to learner roles has come up with findings which run counter to the folk wisdom of the classroom. For instance, Bruton and Samuda (1980) found that learners are capable of correcting each other successfully. Additionally, according to Porter (1986), learners produce more talk with other learners than with native-speaking partners, and learners do not learn each other's errors. Finally, Gass and Varonis (1985) found that there were advantages, when conducting group work, to pairing learners of different proficiency levels as well as from different language backgrounds.

The final element is that of setting, which refers to the learner configuration (either teacher-fronted, small group, pair, or individual), as well as the environment (whether the task takes place in the classroom or outside the classroom). One of the first task studies to be carried out, that by Long, Adams, and Castanos (1976), found that small-group tasks prompt students to use a greater range of language functions than teacher-fronted tasks. In relation to environment, Montgomery and Eisenstein (1985) found that supplementing classroom tasks with community-based experiences resulted in significantly increased language gains.

### **Future directions: extending the research agenda**

Most of the research carried out during the eighties and described in the preceding section was driven by Krashen's input hypothesis, which is based on the belief that opportunities for second language acquisition are maximized when learners are exposed to language which is just a little beyond their current level of competence (Krashen, 1981, 1982). The central research issue here is, What classroom tasks and patterns of interaction provide learners with the greatest amount of comprehensible input? It has been argued that patterns of interaction in which learners are forced to make conversational adjustments promote acquisition. As I have already pointed out, this view represents an indirect rather than direct relationship between environmental factors (for example, types of instruction) and language acquisition. I also referred to research which, while questioning the comprehensible input hypothesis, supported the communicative tasks to which it gave rise.

While the research reviewed in the preceding section represents a healthy state of affairs, the scope needs to be developed and extended both substantively and methodologically. In substantive terms, the research agenda needs to incorporate a greater range of linguistic and psycholinguistic models. Methodologically, the scope of the research needs to be extended by the utilization of a greater range of research tools and techniques. In particular, it would be useful to see the emergence of research which explored the relationships between contextual factors, interpersonal factors, learner proficiency levels, and pedagogic tasks.

In order to indicate the ways in which these principles might influence the shape of future research, I shall briefly review two recent investigations which provide useful indications of the ways in which research on task-based language teaching and learning can be extended both substantively and methodologically.

Berwick (1988, 1993) exemplifies the advantages of extending the research agenda on tasks by drawing on insights from a range of theoretical models. Of particular interest is his utilization of functional grammars, specifically the systemic-functional model first articulated by Halliday (see, for example, Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Hasan, 1976, 1989). This particular model of language attempts to draw explicit links between the functions which language exists to fulfil and its realization at the level of lexicogrammatical choice. In his research, Berwick (1988) explored differences at the level of lexicogrammar attributable to different task types. In classifying tasks, he distinguished between pedagogical and collaborative goals on one hand, and expository and experiential processes on the other. Tasks with pedagogical goals are concerned with the transfer of information through explicit instruction, while collaborative tasks ‘emphasized cooperative, consensual behaviour and exchange of information about a problem or topic which participants explore freely during the task itself’ (Berwick, 1993). Tasks based on expository processes are concerned with theoretically based knowledge, whereas experiential processes are concerned with procedural knowledge (in familiar terms, the former is concerned with theoretical knowing [knowing that], while the latter is concerned with practical knowledge [knowing how]). Berwick uses these two dimensions to situate a range of tasks which he used in his study. These are set out in Table 2.2. A description of the tasks follows.

Task COM1: This task, residing at the expository end of the process continuum and the pedagogical end of the goal continuum, consisted of a lecture about finding string characters in a text through use of the word-processing program of a personal computer, not physically present in the experimental setting.

Task COM2: This task shared the pedagogical goal of COM1, but was more experiential in that it involved a demonstration of how to find

*Table 2.2* Goal and process dimensions of the five tasks used in the Berwick study

<i>Processes</i>			
Goals	Expository		Experiential
Pedagogical	COM1		COM2
Collaborative/social	LEG1	DIS	LEG2

Source: Berwick (1993). Copyright Multilingual Matters. Reprinted by permission.

character strings on the laptop computer when it was physically present in front of the participants.

Task LEG1: Participants in this task faced away from each other. One participant had a small Lego toy made of snap-together plastic parts which had to be described so that the second participant was able to assemble a replica of the toy.

Task LEG2: This task was similar to LEG1, except that participants sat face to face.

Task DIS: The final task was an informal discussion of any topic of common interest to the participants.

The independent variable in Berwick's study was the task. Dependent variables included a range of discourse features associated with the negotiation of meaning in interaction and utilized in many of the task investigations based on the input hypothesis. Variables included clarification requests, comprehension checks, confirmation checks, definitions, display questions, echoes, expressions of lexical uncertainty, referential questions, self-expansions, self-repetitions, and other-repetitions.

Berwick (1993) established through his research that task type is an important determinant of lexicogrammatical exponents. He was also able to relate the tasks and exponents to an educational framework which provides a broad pedagogical rationale for task-based language teaching. I have described his research at some length because it exemplifies the value of drawing on a range of theoretical models in the development of research programmes into task-based language teaching and learning.

The second study reviewed in this section is by Duff (1993). Duff carried out a longitudinal case study of a single learner, investigating the extent to which performance on different types of tasks yielded different types of information on the subject's interlanguage. The three tasks investigated included an interview conversation, a picture description, and a Cambodian folktale narration. The dependent measures included the amount of language produced, the range of vocabulary elicited, nominal reference, and negation. Data were collected from a 24-year-old Cambodian male, over a two-year period.

Duff's study yielded mixed results. While there was some evidence of task-related variability, the subject's performance from one data-collection period to the next also exhibited variability. The study raised five fundamental questions: (a) Are the tasks selected distinct enough to be operationalizable constructs in this type of analysis? (b) Assuming the constructs are valid, are there any meaningful differences across tasks? (c) To what extent can variability be ascribed to other constructs such as genre or topic? (d) Were the features investigated by the researcher the salient ones, or should this line of research be restricted to those features of interlanguage morphology and phonology which have been found to be salient? (e) How is the researcher to account for those differences which were observed?

Duff's study is significant within the current context because it represents a departure from the cross-sectional research which has typified the field since its inception. While the longitudinal case study has been usefully employed in other aspects of SLA research (see, for example, Schmidt, 1983) it is uncommon in research on tasks. In the five fundamental questions she raises as a result of her



study, Duff also provides a basis for a substantial agenda for further research. Finally, she places the issue of interlanguage variability firmly on the research agenda. Looking to the future, I would like to see the issue of variability feature more prominently in research into task-based language learning and teaching.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a selective overview of the development of task-based language teaching. I have tried to show that, while it had its genesis in mainstream education, task-based teaching has become a powerful influence in language education. At a conceptual level, the approach has been supported by changing conceptions of the nature of language and learning – captured under the rubric of communicative language teaching. Empirically, TBLT is supported by a healthy research agenda which emerged from process-oriented second language acquisition.

In the second part of the paper, I have tried to indicate some of the directions that TBLT might take in the future. In particular, I have suggested that the conceptual and empirical basis needs to be extended both substantively and methodologically, and I described two recent investigations which illustrate the possible shape of research under such an extended agenda.

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## CHAPTER 3

# CONCEPTUALIZING SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

This chapter is an edited compilation of two chapters from my 1999 book *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. It illustrates some of the ways in which my thinking on learner-centeredness, experiential learning and task-based language teaching evolved in the ten years following the publication of *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*.

Adapted from *Second Language Teaching and Learning*, Boston, MA: Heinle, 1999.

In order to understand where we are heading as a profession, it is useful to know where we have come from. While it is unlikely that we will progress very far by driving in the rear view mirror, an understanding of the conceptual and empirical basis of second language teaching and learning (SLTL) will give us a solid foundation for looking forward. In the first part of this chapter, I shall explore the educational and philosophical bases for second language teaching and learning, and in the second I shall turn to the empirical foundations.

## Humanistic education and experiential learning

### **Competing concepts of education**

For many people, education is about knowledge: what it is, and how it is to be acquired by succeeding generations of learners, and thus by succeeding generations of humanity. According to this view, the core function of education is to transmit culture. Politically, education has been a perennial hot topic, because those who control knowledge have potential access to privilege and wealth. However, this idea that knowledge is some kind of commodity to be traded in intellectual marketplaces known as schools and universities is only one of many characterizations. Attempting to define what it is to know has preoccupied philosophers just as much as attempting to answer the question of what it is to be. For much of this century, there has been a passionate debate, in Western

educational contexts at least, between those who believe that the function of an educational system is the transmission of a received body of facts, values and procedures for conceptualizing and adding to that body of knowledge, and those who believe that the function of an educational system is to create the conditions whereby learners might generate their own skills and knowledge. It is a debate between those who believe that education is a matter of making meaning for the learner on the one hand, and those who believe that the function is to facilitate the process whereby learners make their own meaning, on the other. Those subscribing to the second view, and I would count myself among them, would agree with Oscar Wilde, that 'Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.'

This ongoing debate within the wider world of general education has had a profound effect on language education, as we shall see. It is also complicated by the fact that for teachers who are native speakers of the language they teach, and who are working as foreign rather than second language teachers, a great deal of their work takes place in cultures that have very different concepts of education from the cultures in which they grew up and within which they came to form their own educational values. This can lead to misunderstandings on the part of both the teacher and the students, which in turn can have a negative influence on the learning process.

All cultures have their own concepts of teaching, learning and education. The native aborigines in the culture where I grew up do not 'educate' their children by giving them lectures. Life skills are taught inductively: Children learn by observing their elders. Cultural customs and norms, and an understanding of who they are as a people are passed on through myths and legends. Aboriginal children can find it profoundly difficult to adjust to the (often implicit) rules and norms of European schools, as Malcolm (1991) and others have pointed out. (I will return to the concepts of 'inductive' and 'deductive' learning at the end of this section.)

In English language teaching, there has long been a debate about the appropriateness of many of the methods used by expatriate teachers and those trained in expatriate methods, some commentators claiming that 'Western' concepts of education are being applied, inappropriately, in non-Western contexts. Increasingly, it is being recognized that pedagogical action needs to be sensitive to the cultural and environmental contexts in which teaching takes place. Not one of the undergraduate students in the university where I currently teach has a parent who went to university. Some of them have parents who never went to school.

The explosion in education in many developing countries has also brought about intergenerational misunderstandings, which sometimes leads to conflict between the participants in the educational process. These parents have very different concepts of education from those of their children. In negotiating how and what one should attempt to achieve with one's students, one needs to be sensitive to the cultural and educational backgrounds from which they come. One also needs to be alive to the potentially alienating effect a university education might have on their lives outside the classroom.

The debate over how education is to be conceptualized in general, and the question of whether 'learning' is a matter of mastering a body of content 'received' from former generations, or the development of skills and attitudes in particular, is reflected in a great deal of contemporary thinking in second language teaching and learning. As we shall see in the rest of this chapter, communicative

language teaching, learner-centered instruction and task-based language teaching are three concepts which have had a particularly important influence on our field over the last 20 years. These three ideas, which are all inter-related, are part of an interpretative view of education, a view which argues against the notion that learning is a matter of having skills and knowledge transmitted from the teacher to the learner. The interpretative tradition, which is strongly rooted in humanistic psychology, argues that, in order for learning to take place, learners must reconstruct the skills and knowledge for themselves; they cannot simply 'receive' these from external sources. The cliché 'If students are to learn, then ultimately they have to do the learning for themselves' is an apt summation of the belief.

### ***Humanism and experiential psychology***

Out of the notion that learners are at the center of the learning process, and that learning is a process of self-discovery, grew experiential learning. In experiential learning, the learner's immediate personal experiences are taken as the point of departure for deciding how to organize the learning process. According to Kohonen (1992), experiential learning has diverse origins, being derived from John Dewey's progressive philosophy of education, Lewin's social psychology, Piaget's model of developmental psychology, Kelley's cognitive theory of education, and the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers in the field of humanistic psychology. What draws these diverse philosophical and academic positions together is the construct of humanism, and it is to this construct that I would now like to turn.

Humanistic psychology attempts to make sense of experience at the point where sociology and psychology intersect. It captures the fact that as humans we are simultaneously looking inwards and operating outwards, and that any attempt to understand what motivates behavior must necessarily capture the individual in relation to the group. Attempts to quarantine human action and motivation to either the individual aspect or the group aspect will result in a partial perspective. This dualistic perspective on experience is captured in the following quote:

... the individual's self-concept is a social product that is shaped gradually through interaction with the environment. It is an organized, integrated pattern of self-related perceptions, which become increasingly differentiated and complex. The development of a healthy self-concept is promoted by a positive self-regard and an unconditional acceptance by the 'significant others'.

(Kohonen, 1992: 15)

Kohonen argues for experiential learning on the grounds that it facilitates personal growth, that it helps learners adapt to social change, that it takes into account differences in learning ability, and that it is responsive both to learner needs and to practical pedagogical considerations. As already indicated, experiential learning builds a bridge from the known to the new by taking the learner's perceptions and experiences as the point of departure for the learning process.

The most comprehensively formulated model of experiential learning is that of Kolb (1984). Kolb suggests that, through experiential learning, the learner

moves from the known to the new through a process of making sense of some immediate experience, and then going beyond the immediate experience through a process of transformation. In the field of language education, the relevance of humanism and experiential learning has been highlighted by Legutke and Thomas. They link humanism and experiential learning in the following way:

The proponents of humanistic education have broadened our concept of learning by emphasizing that meaningful learning has to be self-initiated. Even if the stimulus comes from outside, the sense of discovery, however, and the motivation which that brings has to come from inside driven by the basic human desire for self-realization, well-being and growth. . . . [I]n terms of personal and inter-personal competence the process-oriented classroom revolves around issues of risk and security, co-operation and competition, self-directedness and other-directedness; and meaningful and meaningless activities. We have also tried to make clear that 'teachers who claim it is not their job to take these phenomena into account may miss out on some of the most essential ingredients in the management of successful learning' (Underhill 1989, p.252).

(Legutke and Thomas, 1991: 269)

To my mind, the most articulate examination of humanism and experiential learning in relation to language education is provided by Kohonen (1992), who argues that the experiential model offers 'potential for a learning atmosphere of shared partnership, a common purpose, and a joint management of learning' (p. 31). He goes on to suggest that, in classrooms infused with the vision promised by experiential learning, behavior is a joint responsibility of the whole class, and that the teacher is only one member within that class. In Table 3.1 he provides the following contrasts between traditional and experiential models of education in ten key dimensions.

### ***Inductive and deductive learning***

Another important pair of concepts is that of 'inductive' and 'deductive' learning. Simply put, deductive learning is a process of adding to our knowledge by working from principles to examples. This has been an important intellectual tool within Western philosophical and scientific thinking since the time of Aristotle. According to Cohen and Manion (1985), deductive reasoning went unchallenged from the time of Aristotle to the Middle Ages, when the philosopher Francis Bacon turned the process of working from principles to examples on its head. Bacon argued for induction as a way of adding to our knowledge of the world. In induction, one works from examples to principles, rules and generalizations.

It is all too easy to equate humanism and experiential learning with an inductive, discovery-oriented approach to education, but this is probably an oversimplification. In fact, even in the scientific area, the opposition between induction and deduction has been questioned. Mouly (1978), for example, has proposed a synthesis between the two, arguing that inquiry consists of:

. . . a back-and-forth movement in which the investigator first operates inductively from observations to hypotheses, and then deductively from

Table 3.1 Traditional and experiential educational models compared

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Traditional model: behaviorism</i>	<i>Experiential model: constructivism</i>
1 View of learning	Transmission of knowledge	Transformation of knowledge
2 Power relation	Emphasis on teacher's authority	Teacher as 'learner among learners'
3 Teacher's role	Providing mainly frontal instruction; professionalism as individual autonomy	Facilitating learning (largely in small groups); collaborative professionalism
4 Learner's role	Relatively passive recipient of information; mainly individual work	Active participation, largely in collaborative small groups
5 View of knowledge	Presented as 'certain'; application problem solving	Construction of personal knowledge; identification of problems
6 View of curriculum	Static; hierarchical grading of subject matter, predefined content and product	Dynamic; looser organization of subject matter, including open parts and integration
7 Learning experiences	Knowledge of facts, concepts and skills; focus on content and product	Emphasis on process; learning skills, self-inquiry, social and communication skills
8 Control of process	Mainly teacher-structured learning	Emphasis on learner; self-directed learning
9 Motivation	Mainly extrinsic	Mainly intrinsic
10 Evaluation	Product-oriented: achievement testing; criterion-referencing (and norm-referencing)	Process-oriented: reflection on process, self-assessment; criterion-referencing

these hypotheses to their implications, in order to check their validity from the standpoint of compatibility with accepted knowledge. After revision, where necessary, these hypotheses are submitted to further test through the collection of data specifically designed to test their validity at the empirical level.

(Mouly, 1978)

Although Mouly's comments were made within the context of research, it is not difficult to see their application to the field of learning in general, and of language learning in particular. The back and forth movement between language data and linguistic principles or 'rules' which characterizes an 'organic' approach to language acquisition is taken up and elaborated on elsewhere. It also seems consistent with the ways in which humans function cognitively.

It seems to me that people respond to their environment by setting up a constant stream of hypotheses. The cumbersome cycle of inductive inquiry – first we do this and then that – comes nowhere close to reflecting the

quicksilver oscillation between induction and deduction that I am inclined to believe reflects how people process language (amongst everything else), or how they respond to the learning tasks that we give them.

(Nigel Bruce, personal communication)

In the rest of this chapter, we shall see how humanism and experiential learning have informed some of the most important and influential ideas to have emerged in language teaching over the last 20 years. These include communicative language teaching, learner-centered instruction, negotiated curricula, and task-based language teaching.

## **Communicative language teaching**

Without doubt, the most pervasive changes to teaching practice over the last 20 years are those which can be captured by the rubric ‘communicative language teaching’ or CLT. In this section, I shall discuss some of the conceptual aspects of this development. In the section on the empirical background to SLTL, I shall review some of the research that has informed CLT.

## **Reconceptualizing language**

An important stimulus for changing the way we teach language came during the 1970s when linguists and language educators began a reappraisal of language itself. Up to and including the 1960s, language was generally seen as a system of rules, and the task for the language learner was to internalize these rules by whatever means were at his/her disposal (or, more usually, in formal contexts, at the disposal of the teacher or teaching institution). Language was seen as a unified system, and the ultimate aim of the learner was to approach the target language norms of the ‘native speaker’. The priority for learners was to master the structures of the language, and in this process considerations of meaning were seen almost as peripheral. In fact, some language specialists argued that instruction should focus almost exclusively on teaching basic syntactic patterns, ignoring, or at least minimizing, the development of vocabulary and semantic systems. (There were exceptions to this. See, for example, Newmark and Reibel, 1968.)

However, during the 1970s, a much richer conceptualization of language began to emerge. Language was seen as a system for the expression of meaning, and linguists began to analyze language as a system for the expression of meanings, rather than as a system of abstract syntactic rules. (For a view on how these changing concepts began to change the way methodologists approached the teaching of language, see Brumfit, 1984.)

The realization that language could be analyzed, described, and taught as a system for expressing meanings had a profound effect on language teaching. At least it had a profound effect at the level of syllabus design and textbook writing. Whether the effect was quite so pervasive or profound in language classrooms themselves is open to question. If language is a system for expressing meanings, and if different learners have different communicative ends in view, then surely these different communicative ends should be reflected in the things that learners are taught. In other words, there ought to be different syllabuses for different learners. It was this insight that led to the development of needs-based courses



and the emergence of tools and techniques for analyzing and describing learner needs (Munby, 1978; Brindley, 1984).

### ***Tailoring courses to learners***

The notion that it was not necessary for learners to master a particular grammatical structure or lexical item simply because it happened to be part of the system, coupled with the insight that what was learned should reflect the differentiated needs of different learner groups, was in harmony with the interpretative view of knowledge being fashioned within humanistic psychology and experiential learning. These traditions legitimized the idea that it was not necessary to attempt to learn everything, that a language was not an external body of knowledge into which the learner had to be ‘initiated’ – that, in fact, there may not actually be external bodies of knowledge.

In terms of methodology, this new view of language also had an important effect. If the aim of language teaching is to help learners develop skills for expressing different communicative meaning, then surely these ought to be reflected in classroom tasks and activities. Later in the chapter, we shall see how this insight led to the emergence of task-based approaches to language teaching.

The notion that different learners have different communicative requirements, and that these ought to be reflected both in the content of the curriculum (what is taught) and in learning processes (how it is taught), was also reinforced by an ideological shift in focus away from the teacher and the textbook and towards the learner. Learner-centered education, which grew partly out of the humanistic tradition that I have already discussed, was also reinforced by developments in SLTL.

## **Learner-centered education**

### ***Defining learner-centeredness***

The concept of learner-centered education has been controversial, mainly because it is susceptible to multiple interpretations. Some teachers react negatively to the concept, because they feel that implicit in the notion is a devaluing of their own professional roles. Others believe that it involves handing over to the learner duties and responsibilities that rightly belong to the teacher. I believe that both of these criticisms are misguided, and I spell out my reasons for this view later in the section. First, however, I would like to describe how I became interested in the subject in the first place. It all began many years ago, when I began to notice a major gap between what I was focusing on as a teacher and what my learners were taking away from the pedagogical opportunities I was providing. I quickly became obsessed with the question which was so admirably framed by Dick Allwright: ‘Why don’t learners learn what teachers teach?’ (Allwright, 1984). When I began collecting samples of learner language and analyzing these, I discovered that there was a gap between the sorts of things I was trying to get my students to learn and the things that they actually appeared to learn as evidenced by the things they said and wrote. In order to understand the complex processes underlying my students’ attempts at learning, I realized that I had to see things from their point of view. I had to find out what they felt they wanted to learn, and how they went about the task of learning. I came to the belief that teachers working in classrooms

guided by a learner-centered philosophy would have to make similar decisions to those working in any other kind of classroom; a key difference would be that, in a learner-centered classroom, decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed will be made with reference to the learner. Information about learners and, where feasible, from learners will be used to answer the key questions of what, how, when and how well.

However, I found that it is often a mistake to assume that learners come into the language classroom with a sophisticated knowledge of pedagogy, or with a natural ability to make informed choices about their own learning processes. (This is what I characterize as the 'strong' interpretation of learner-centeredness.) In fact, there are relatively few learners who are naturally endowed with the ability to make informed choices about what to learn, how to learn it and when to learn. They have to go through a process, and often a lengthy process, of learning how to learn, and they can usually only do this with the assistance and guidance of the teacher. The role of the teacher is therefore enhanced in a learner-centered system, and the skills demanded of the teacher are also greater. It is for this reason that I reject the notion that teachers are somehow devalued in a learner-centered system.

### ***Learner involvement in the learning process***

At this point, it is necessary to turn from the concept of learner-centeredness to the closely related concept of learning-centeredness. A learning-centered classroom is designed to carry the learner toward the ability to make critical pedagogical decisions by systematically training them in the skills they need to make such decisions. Such a classroom is constituted with complementary aims. While one set of aims is focused on language content, the other is focused on the learning process. Learners are therefore systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. Rather than assuming that the learner comes to the learning arrangement cashed up, as it were, with critical learning skills, the sensitive teacher accepts that many learners will only begin to develop such skills during the course of instruction.

Learner-centeredness is therefore not an all-or-nothing concept. It is a relative matter. It is also not the case that a learner-centered classroom is one in which the teacher hands over power, responsibility and control to the students from day one. I have found that it is usually well into a course before learners are in a position to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn, and it is not uncommon that learners are in such a position only towards the end of the course. That said, I would advocate the development of curricula and materials which encourage learners to move towards the fully autonomous end of the pedagogical continuum.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that learner-centered instruction is not a matter of handing over rights and powers to learners in a unilateral way. Nor does it involve devaluing the teacher. Rather, it is a matter of educating learners so that they can gradually assume greater responsibility for their own learning. I shall discuss how this might be done in the next section, when I discuss negotiated curricula. In fact, learner-centered curricula are not radical alternatives to more traditional approaches to the design and delivery of language programs, as the following quote attempts to show:

[A learner-centred] curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation (see for example Hunkins 1980). However, the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught. This change in orientation has major practical implications for the entire curriculum process, since a negotiated curriculum cannot be introduced and managed in the same way as one which is prescribed by the teacher or teaching institutions. In particular, it places the burden for all aspects of curriculum development on the teacher.

(Nunan, 1988: 2)

A criticism which is sometimes made of this approach is that learners simply do not know what they want. While it is true to say that learners do not always have the necessary skills and insights to make informed choices (thus the reason for incorporating a learning-how-to-learn dimension into the classroom), I have yet to meet a learner who has absolutely no idea of what they want. They may not be able to formulate and articulate their needs in any precise fashion, but the notion that they do not have ideas on the subject is belied by a substantial amount of research. Some years ago, I carried out a comparative study into the learning preferences of teachers and learners in the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program (Nunan, 1988). When I compared the preferences of learners and teachers in relation to selected learning tasks and activities, I found some stark contrasts and dramatic mismatches. The results of this study are summarized in Table 3.2. From the table, it can be seen that there are mismatches between teachers and learners on all but one of the items (students and teachers agreed that conversation practice was a very high priority). In all other cases, teachers and learners disagreed. For example, learners gave pair work a low rating, while teachers gave this item a very high rating. The same was the case with student self-discovery of errors. I am not suggesting that student views should be acceded to in all cases. However, I would argue that, at the very least, teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what they want to learn and how they want to learn and take this into consideration when planning their courses.

*Table 3.2* A comparison of student and teacher ratings of selected learning activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
Pronunciation practice	Very high	Medium
Teacher explanations	Very high	High
Conversation practice	Very high	Very high
Error correction	Very high	Low
Vocabulary development	Very high	High
Listening to/using cassettes	Low	Medium high
Student self-discovery of errors	Low	Very high
Using pictures/films/video	Low	Low medium
Pair work	Low	Very high
Language games	Very low	Low

Unfortunately, when confronted with a mismatch between their own views and those of their students, teachers often feel that there are only two ways to resolve the dilemma: either to give in to the students (assuming that the students themselves are in agreement over what they want) or to adopt an 'I'm the doctor and I know best for you' attitude. However, there are many positions in between. Negotiation, by definition, is a two-way process. The key thing is to recognize that differences exist, and to create a win-win situation so that everyone gets something. (We shall look at the practicalities of doing this in the next section.)

As I write this chapter, I am confronting a situation with one of my classes, in which there is conflict between the desires of the students and my own pedagogical agenda. Although it is ostensibly an academic writing class, the aim of which is to prepare students to write academic essays in English, the students want a 'fun'-based course with lots of videos and small group work. I am in the process of negotiating with the students and trying to restructure the course to give them some of the things they want while at the same time achieving the original aims of the course.

### **Learner-centeredness: another dimension**

There is one other sense in which the term 'learner-centered' is often used. This is when it is used to refer to classrooms, not in which learners are involved in making choices about what and how to learn, but in which learners are actively involved in the learning process, classrooms in which the focus is on the learner in the sense in which they are the ones who do all the work. As we shall see, this kind of classroom is, in fact, consistent with a particular line of second language acquisition research that suggests acquisition is facilitated when opportunities for learners to interact are maximized.

The potential benefit of engineering classroom interactions so that the focus is firmly on the learners rather than the teacher is nicely illustrated in a classroom sequence described in Barnes' (1976) classic book *From Communication to Curriculum*. While the episode took place in a content classroom, the outcomes could apply to any classroom. The input data for the task was a poem entitled 'The Bully Asleep' in which a teacher fails to intervene when a group of children harass a sleeping bully. Barnes arranged the students into small groups, and simply told them to 'Talk about the poem in any way you like and let me know when you've finished' (p. 25). He then recorded and analyzed the resulting small group discussions. From his analysis, Barnes concluded that the task 'worked' because

The absence of a teacher has placed control of learning strategies in the pupils' hands. In this case, since no task was set, the children control the questions they choose to ask: the issue of whether the teacher acted wisely is theirs, not the poet's. But the teacher's absence removes from their work the usual source of authority. They cannot turn to him to solve dilemmas. Thus in this discussion . . . the children not only formulate hypotheses, but are compelled to evaluate them for themselves. This they can do in only two ways: by testing them against their existing view of 'how things go in the world', and by going back to the 'evidence'. In this case the evidence is a poem, but it might equally have been a map, a facsimile of an historical document, a table of numerical data, or a piece of scientific apparatus.

(Barnes, 1976: 29)

### **Principles of adult learning**

The characterization I have given above, in which learners are systematically sensitized into processes underlying their own learning, and are gradually encouraged to take greater and greater responsibility for their own learning, is what might be called a 'weak' interpretation of learner-centeredness. A 'strong' interpretation would argue (as, for example, Brundage and MacKeracher [1980] have done) that, from the very first lesson, learners have a right to be involved in the decision-making processes about what they should learn, how they should learn, and how they might be evaluated. This 'strong' tradition emerged from studies into adult learning or 'andragogy' (see, for example, Knowles, 1983).

The following set of principles underpin the practice of adult learning. They were formulated by Brundage and MacKeracher (1980), who have carried out extensive research into adult learning.

- Adults who value their own experience as a resource for further learning or whose experience is valued by others are better learners.
- Adults learn best when they are involved in developing learning objectives for themselves which are congruent with their current and idealized self concept.
- Adults have already developed organized ways of focusing on, taking in, and processing information. These are referred to as cognitive style.
- The learner reacts to all experience as he/she perceives it, not as the teacher presents it.
- Adults enter into learning activities with an organized set of descriptions and feelings about themselves which influence the learning process.
- Adults are more concerned with whether they are changing in the direction of their own idealized self-concept than whether they are meeting standards and objectives set for them by others.
- Adults do not learn when over-stimulated or when experiencing extreme stress or anxiety.
- Those adults who can process information through multiple channels and have learned 'how to learn' are the most productive learners.
- Adults learn best when the content is personally relevant to past experience or present concerns and the learning process is relevant to life experiences.
- Adults learn best when novel information is presented through a variety of sensory modes and experiences with sufficient repetitions and variations on themes to allow distinctions in patterns to emerge.

You can see that this list strongly reflects the humanistic and experiential traditions which emphasize the constructive role of the learner within the learning process. In fact, when I first came across these principles, it occurred to me that many of them may reflect the way all learners, and not just adults, approach learning.

Most of the work already cited has been carried out within general education. However, in 1984 Brindley carried out a detailed study of adult learning with immigrants in Australia and their teachers. From his research, he found that

... one of the fundamental principles underlying the notion of permanent education is that education should develop in individuals the capacity to control their own destiny and that, therefore, the learner should be seen as being at the centre of the educational process. For the teaching institution and the teacher, this means that instructional programmes should be centred around learners' needs and that learners themselves should exercise their own responsibility in the choice of learning objectives, content and methods as well as in determining the means used to assess their performance.

(Brindley, 1984: 4–5)

## **Negotiated curricula**

The philosophy of learner-centeredness has been given practical effect in the form of negotiated curricula in which the views of the learners as well as the pedagogical agenda of the teacher are satisfied through a process of give-and-take. In a classroom where the content and process are negotiated, neither learners nor teacher have it all their own way. As the label suggests, what gets taught and how it is learned are arrived at through discussion and compromise.

## ***Learner contributions to the learning process***

On a number of occasions, I have worked in contexts in which it has been feasible to negotiate with learners at all stages of the learning process. In most situations, however, it is at the stage of curriculum implementation that negotiation is a reality. For those who would question the feasibility of negotiating with learners in certain contexts, I would argue that there is an element of negotiation in every classroom encounter. It is not possible to maintain an exclusively non-negotiable classroom for any length of time. In other words, 'negotiation' is a variable commodity within the pedagogical transactions of the classroom. It is simply not the case, at the level of curriculum implementation, that learning is either negotiated or mandated. Negotiations can involve not only big ticket items relating to the overall content and procedure of a lesson, but many more modest items such as whether to do a particular task in groups or in pairs.

Is there any evidence that justifies the notion that learners should be given a say in their own pedagogical destiny? I believe there is. In 1992, Slimani decided to find out what learners actually learn from classroom interaction. She posed the following questions:

- 'What is it that individual learners claim to have learned from interactive classroom events [this claimed learning she terms "uptake"]?' and
- 'What is it that happens in the lesson that can account for this uptake?'

Her learners were a group of Algerian learners of English as a foreign language who were preparing to undertake engineering studies in English. Slimani found that topics initiated in the classroom by the learners were much more likely to be nominated as having been learned than those nominated by the teacher. In other words, when learners had an opportunity to contribute to the

content of the lesson, that was the content which learners would claim to have learned. She reports that:

. . . about 77.45 per cent of the topicalisation was effected by the teacher. This is not particularly surprising in view of the fact that the discourse was unidirectionally controlled by the teacher. . . . What appears to be strikingly interesting though is that a further analysis of the effect of the teacher's versus the learners' scarce opportunities . . . for topicalisation showed that the latter offered much higher chances for items to be uptaken. Learners benefited much more from their peers' rare instance of topicalisation than from the teacher's. . . . *[T]opics initiated by learners attracted more claims from the learners than the ones initiated by the teacher.*

(Slimani, 1992: 211, italics added)

### **Moving learners along the negotiation continuum**

As I have already indicated, negotiation is not an all-or-nothing commodity. There are levels and degrees of negotiation. In fact, it is a continuum. In my own classrooms, I work hard at moving learners along the continuum. This can be done by incorporating a series of steps into the educational process. Although I have set the following steps out sequentially, some of the steps overlap, and can be introduced simultaneously. The is particularly true of Steps 4–9, which focus on learning processes, and can be introduced alongside Steps 1–3, which are more content-oriented.

- **Step 1: Make instruction goals clear to learners**  
A first step in giving learners a voice is to make instructional goals clear to the students themselves. If the evidence that I have gathered in many classrooms over the years is anything to go by, this is relatively rare. In a study I carried out some years ago into aspects of classroom management, there was only a single teacher who spelled out the pedagogical agenda for her learners. If you are producing your own materials, or adapting those written by others, it is relatively easy to make the goals explicit. If you have learners at an appropriate level of proficiency and stage of development, you can also involve them in identifying and reflecting on instructional goals.  
I believe that the idea of making the pedagogical agenda explicit to the learners is relatively uncontroversial, and something which can be done with all but the youngest of learners. This provides a basis for learners to be involved in selecting their own goals and content. Dam and Gabrielsen (1988) found that even relatively young learners were capable of making decisions about the content and processes of their own learning. Learners, regardless of their aptitude or ability, were capable of a positive and productive involvement in selecting their own content and learning procedures. Furthermore, learners were also positive in accepting responsibility for their own learning.
- **Step 2: Allow learners to create their own goals**  
The next step in giving learners a voice would be to allow learners to create their own goals and content. An interesting and practical way of involving

learners at this level is reported in Parkinson and O'Sullivan (1990: 119). They report on the notion of the 'action meeting' as a way of involving learners in modifying course content.

A mechanism was needed for course management: as the guiding and motivating force behind the course, it would have to be able to deal with individual concerns and negotiate potential conflicts of interest, need, and temperament. . . . [This was done through] a series of Action Meetings. . . .

(1990: 119–120)

- Step 3: Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom

A logical extension of this idea is to get learners activating their language outside the classroom itself. Again, this can be done through encouraging students to reflect on, discuss, and come up with suggestions for ways of learning and using English independently outside of the classroom.

- Step 4: Raise awareness of learning processes

So far, I have talked about giving learners a voice in deciding what to learn. However, it's also important to give them a voice in how they learn. I have found that the best place to begin in this is to raise their awareness of the strategies underlying classroom tasks. This is something that all teachers can do, regardless of whether they are working with a mandated curriculum and materials, or whether they are relatively free to decide what to teach and how to teach it.

- Step 5: Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies

The next step in the development of a learner-centered classroom would be to train learners to identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies.

Once I have helped my learners to identify their own preferred styles and strategies, I begin to give them choices from a range of options. The notion that learners are capable of making choices has been questioned by some commentators. It has also been suggested that the notion of choice is a Western one, which doesn't work in non-Western educational contexts. All I can say is that it works in Hong Kong. I was also able to make it work in Thailand. There is evidence from other sources as well. Widdows and Voller (1991), for example, investigated the ability of Japanese university students to make choices. As a result of their study they found that students were able to make choices, and that their preferences were often markedly at odds with the content and methodology that they were exposed to in class.

- Step 6: Encourage learner choice

In some foreign language contexts, the notion of student choice may be a relatively unfamiliar, or even alien, one. In such a case it is preferable to engage the learners in a relatively modest level of decision-making in the first instance. For example, if the data for a lesson include a reading passage and a listening text, learners might be asked to decide which they would rather do first, the reading or the listening. If teachers are uncomfortable with the idea of students doing different things at the same time, then it can be put to a class vote. The point is not that learners in different groups will be doing things that are radically different, but that they are being sensitized to the notion of making choices.



Once learners are used to the idea, they can be invited to make more elaborate choices, by, for example, reviewing a unit in their textbook and deciding which tasks to do and which not to do.

- **Step 7: Allow learners to generate their own tasks**  
Having encouraged learners to make choices, the next step is to provide them with opportunities to modify and adapt classroom tasks. This could be a preliminary step to teaching students to create their own tasks. This need not involve highly technical materials design skills, which would clearly be unrealistic. I have started learners on the path towards developing their own materials by giving them the text but not the questions in a reading comprehension task and asking them, in small groups, to write their own questions. These are then exchanged with another group to be answered and discussed.
- **Step 8: Encourage learners to become teachers**  
At a more challenging level, learners would become teachers. There is nothing like the imminent prospect of having to teach something to stimulate learning. Lest this should be thought utopian, I can point to precedents in the literature. Assinder, for example, gave her students the opportunity of developing video-based materials which they subsequently used for teaching other students in the class. The innovation was a success, the critical factor of which, according to Assinder, was the opportunity for the learner to become the teacher: 'Being asked to present something to another group gave a clear reason for the work, called for greater responsibility to one's own group, and led to increased motivation and greatly improved accuracy. Being an "expert" on a topic noticeably increased self-esteem, and getting more confident week by week gave [the learners] a feeling of genuine progress' (Assinder, 1991: 228).
- **Step 9: Encourage learners to become researchers**  
Finally, it is possible to educate learners to become language researchers. Once again, for those who think this notion fanciful or utopian, there is a precedent in the literature. Heath (1992), working with educationally disadvantaged children in the United States, asked her collaborators to document the language they encountered in the community beyond the classroom. Despite the struggle involved, students learned through the process of becoming ethnographic researchers that communication is negotiation, and they got to reflect on the important relationships between socialization, language and thought. In substantive terms, all students moved out of the Basic English in 'regular' English classes, and two moved into 'honors' English. As Heath reports, 'Accomplishments were real and meaningful for these students.'

In this section, I have provided some practical illustrations of how philosophical concepts of humanism and experiential learning can lead, through learner-centered attitudes and negotiated curricula, to practical classroom action. In the next section, I review an approach to language pedagogy known as task-based language teaching (TBLT) which draws on all of these ideas and practices. As we shall see, in addition to drawing on the conceptual developments outlined earlier in the chapter, task-based language teaching has sought to develop a research agenda so that ideas put forward by advocates of TBLT can be contested against empirical data from teaching and learning.

## **Task-based language teaching**

Task-based language teaching is an approach to the design of language courses in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks. It draws on and reflects the experiential and humanistic traditions described above, as well as reflecting the changing conceptions of language itself. As we shall see, it also draws on a growing body of empirical research.

### ***Defining 'task'***

Within the literature, tasks have been defined in a variety of ways. Long, for instance, suggests that a task

is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination, and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between.

(Long, 1985: 89)

In my 1989 book on task-based language teaching, I drew a distinction between pedagogical tasks and 'real-world' or target tasks. The tasks Long sets out above are target tasks. They are the sorts of things that individuals typically do outside the classroom. The ultimate rationale for language instruction is to enable learners to do these things using language, and it is to be expected that classroom time will be taken up with rehearsal tasks such as making reservations, writing letters, finding street destinations in a directory, and so on. However, learners will also do many things in class that are not rehearsals for performance outside of the classroom. Listening to a tape and repeating, doing a jigsaw reading task, solving a problem in small groups: these tasks are undertaken, not because learners will do them outside of the classroom, but because it is assumed that they facilitate the development of a learner's general language proficiency. They have a pedagogical or 'psycholinguistic' rationale.

Richards, Platt and Weber have such a rationale when they suggest that a task is

an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative.

(1986: 289)

My own definition of a pedagogical task is as follows:

... a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilising their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.

(Nunan, 1989: 10)

Examples of classroom tasks include:

Listening to a taped weather forecast and deciding what to wear  
 Responding to a party invitation  
 Completing a banking application form  
 Describing a photo of one's family

### **'Task' versus 'exercise'**

At the risk of oversimplification, the essential difference between a task and an exercise is that a task has a non-linguistic outcome, while an exercise has a linguistic outcome. Thus, in the first example given above, the outcome will be the selection of appropriate clothing, given (and assuming the accuracy of) a weather forecast. This is a non-linguistic outcome, and success will be measured in non-linguistic terms (whether the person is too hot, too cold or just right). In contrast, the following is an exercise (and a creative one at that!), because the outcome will be a set of structures. Success will be decided in linguistic terms.

Imagine you are a travel buff and write sentences describing your standard equipment. Use a nonrestrictive relative clause with a subject relative pronoun for each item.

Example: lap-top

I always bring a lap-top, which is a portable computer.

- |                |                      |
|----------------|----------------------|
| 1 luggage cart | 5 travel calculator  |
| 2 money belt   | 6 detergent          |
| 3 travel iron  | 7 a Swiss army knife |
| 4 adapter      | 8 book light         |

(Frodesen and Eyring, 1993: 159)

Elsewhere, I have suggested that a task has some sort of input data (I use this term rather than 'text' because the data may not contain language. It may be a set of pictures, diagrams, or other non-verbal material). It will also contain a set of procedures which specify what learners are to do in relation to the data. Implicit in any task will be a pedagogical goal, as well as particular roles for teachers and learners. One final dimension worth considering is the setting in which the task will be performed. Will this be within the classroom or outside? Will the learners work in teacher-fronted, small group or individual mode?

In describing, analyzing and creating tasks, it is useful to think of the four essential dimensions of 'task'. These are the dimensions of language, procedure,

learner and learning process. In each of these dimensions there are several key principles. These are:

- 1 the authenticity principle;
- 2 the form–function principle; and
- 3 the task dependency principle.

### ***The authenticity principle***

In terms of language, key considerations concern the extent to which linguistic data to which learners are exposed are authentic, and the extent to which the relationships between linguistic form and communicative function are clear to the learner. As a rough rule of thumb, we can say that authentic data are samples of spoken and written language that have not been specifically written for the purposes of teaching language. Much has been made of the fact that ‘authenticity’ is a relative matter and that, as soon as one extracts a piece of language from the communicative context in which it occurred and take it into the classroom, one is ‘de-authenticating’ it to a degree. I would not disagree with this. Nor would I argue that non-authentic data should be banned from the classroom. However, I would argue that learners should be fed as rich a diet of authentic data as possible, because, ultimately, if they only ever encounter contrived dialogues and listening texts, their task will be made more difficult.

The advantage of using authentic data is that learners encounter target language items in the kinds of contexts in which they naturally occur, rather than in contexts that have been concocted by a textbook writer. Ultimately, this will assist learners because they will experience the language item in interaction with other closely related grammatical and discursal elements.

### ***The form–function principle***

When designing tasks, the second key consideration concerns teaching language in ways that make form and function relationships transparent. I suspect that one reason for the mismatches between teaching and learning is that learners often find it difficult to see the functional purpose for having different linguistic forms. For example, exercises in which learners are required to carry out various kinds of linguistic transformations (such as changing active voice sentences into passives and back again) may be fine for teaching new linguistic forms, but not for showing them how to use the forms of making meanings. In the case of the active/passive voice example, the implicit message for the learner is that these two forms carry the same meaning, that they are alternative ways of saying the same thing.

The challenge, in activating this principle, is to design tasks that require learners to use inductive and deductive reasoning to develop their own understanding of the relationship between form and function. This is a developmental process, and it often takes learners many years to develop an accurate understanding of a particular relationship.

### ***The task dependency principle***

In relation to pedagogical procedures, that is, what learners actually do in relation to the data they are working with, the key question is: What principles can

the teacher, materials developer or course designer draw on in order to arrive at an instructional sequence in which tasks flow logically from one to the next? In my own work, I have sought to do this by invoking the 'task dependency' principle, in which each succeeding task in the instructional sequence flows out of, and is dependent on, the one that precedes it. In this way, a series of tasks in a lesson or unit of work forms a kind of pedagogical 'ladder', each task representing a rung on the ladder, enabling the learner to reach higher and higher levels of communicative performance. As a general principle (and *not* an unvarying rule), I also sequence tasks from reception to production. In other words, listening and reading tasks generally come before writing and speaking tasks. The earlier tasks can therefore act as models for the learner, providing them with language and content to draw on when they come to produce their own language. A final principle that can be drawn on in order to facilitate coherence is to arrange an instructional sequence so that what I call 'reproductive tasks' precede 'creative' tasks. A reproductive task is one in which the student reproduces language provided by the teacher, the text-book or the tape. In contrast, creative tasks are those that require learners to come up with language for which they have not been specifically cued. In other words, they are asked to put together familiar elements in new or novel combinations.

In designing sequences of tasks, it is important to consider the salience for learners of the pedagogical goals of the task, the extent to which learning strategies are made explicit, the extent to which the task incorporates an experiential philosophy of learning by doing, and the opportunities for inductive learning that are provided. We also need to consider the extent to which learners are given space to contribute their own ideas, feelings and attitudes, the extent to which they are given active (rather than reactive) roles, and the opportunities they have to make choices.

In placing 'task' at the center of the curriculum development process, we have blurred the distinction between syllabus design (which is concerned with selecting and sequencing linguistic and experiential content) and methodology (which is concerned with the selection and sequencing of pedagogical procedures). The danger, in designing courses based on a collection of tasks, is that, if we have no principles for selecting, sequencing and integrating our material, courses may end up as little more than a collection of classroom 'tricks'. There are two ways to get around this problem. The first is to reference our selection of tasks against a clearly specified set of curricular goals. The second is to invoke the task dependency principle, sequencing and integrating tasks into sequences of task 'ladders', in which succeeding tasks evolve out of the ones that go before.

In the first part of this chapter, I placed second language teaching and learning firmly within an educational context, and showed that many of the issues confronting language teachers are also preoccupying content teachers. I framed the chapter within a long-running controversy over the nature of knowledge and learning, and made clear my own bias towards a constructivist view of knowledge. Such a view is in harmony with ruling concepts in the field of language teaching, including communicative language, task-based language teaching, learner-centeredness and negotiated curricula. In the rest of the chapter, I look at how the theoretical and empirical perspectives presented above led to significant changes in pedagogy.

## **From the traditional to the contemporary**

When contemplating change, a challenge is not to throw out well established practices, but to incorporate new ways of doing things into existing practice. In this sense, change will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. One of the things holding us back as a profession over many years has been the 'pendulum' effect in which fashions have swung wildly from one extreme to another. By linking developments in language teaching firmly to the educational mainstream, and by testing out new ideas critically, we should reach a phase in the evolution of the profession in which we are not ashamed to admit to merit in past practices, while, at the same time, being able to acknowledge that significant improvements are necessary.

Insights from theory and research have led to some fundamental changes in our beliefs about the nature of language and learning, and this has led inevitably to a change in the ways in which we go about the business of language teaching. However, as I have already indicated, I believe that current trends are basically evolutionary rather than revolutionary in nature, as methodologists and curriculum developers seek to add value to tried and tested practices rather than to subvert or reject them.

In the rest of this chapter, I will show how contemporary trends have added value to practice, or have prompted a reassessment and re-evaluation of practice in the areas of syllabus design, approaches to teaching, the role of the learner, approaches to language, the role of texts, resources and approaches to learning, classroom organization and assessment.

## **Stimuli for change**

### ***Ineffectiveness of traditional approaches***

A perennial stimulus for change in language education has been dissatisfaction with the results obtained by 'traditional' methods, often at great cost to schools and language systems, and the expenditure of tremendous effort by students and teachers. In grammar-translation classrooms, learners typically spent years learning English and yet many of them were still unable to use the language effectively. They often knew a good deal about the language but were unable to use this knowledge to communicate appropriately. In systems where grammar-translation gave way to audiolingualism, students were able to parrot responses in predictable situations of use, but had difficulty communicating effectively in the relatively unpredictable world beyond the classroom.

Many concluded that it was a poor investment if all that work seemed to offer so little practical result. Students had a basic foundation of language knowledge but they did not know how to put that knowledge to active use. To help them to communicate and use that language knowledge, it was gradually recognized and accepted that a new approach to language learning and teaching was needed. Learners needed to understand that language is not just a list of grammatical patterns and a collection of words. Language as communication involves the active use of grammar and vocabulary to listen and read effectively and to speak with and write to other people. Language needs to be learned functionally so that learners are able to see that different forms communicate different meanings.

One response to the perception that language educators are relatively ineffective was to question the value of learning another language. I would challenge that perception. I believe that language learning should have a central place in any educational system. If we accept what Pinker (1994) and his colleagues have to say, then language is arguably the defining characteristic of the human species, and a knowledge of language in general, as well as an ability to use one's first and at least one other language, should be one of the defining characteristics of the educated individual. As the bumper sticker says: 'Monolingualism is curable!' In a world that is increasingly intermeshed economically, environmentally and electronically, the ability to communicate effectively is crucial.

### ***Relevance of language teaching to general education***

It is only through language that we can communicate with each other, share our ideas, tell people what we have experienced, express our wishes and desires, solve complex problems by drawing on information we read or hear and, above all, communicate in the workplace and across cultures with people from other countries. To achieve these objectives, however, we need to learn language as communication not just as a list of facts to be memorized or a set of symbols to be manipulated. This, as we saw earlier, has been an important force in the evolution of a new approach to language learning, one which begins from this active use of language and which involves learners in cooperative learning tasks using language, helped by their teachers and specially designed learning materials. This is a central aim of contemporary approaches to language teaching.

The skills developed through the application of active, cooperative learning principles can flow through to other subjects as well. Effective foreign language learning produces learners with the social and cognitive problem solving skills that can be deployed in other subjects on the school curriculum. If only we could get language teachers and subject teachers communicating with each other, it might be possible to fashion a new type of school curriculum, one in which the familiar elements are not jettisoned, but recombined. Then, the relevance of the intellectual knowledge, learning skills, interpersonal development and intercultural sensitivities fostered in the language classroom might be appreciated by others with a vested interest in education.

### **Syllabus design**

Traditionally, the field of curriculum development has been divided into syllabus design, methodology, and evaluation (Tyler, 1949). Syllabus design has to do with selecting and sequencing content, methodology with selecting and sequencing appropriate learning experiences, and evaluation with appraising learners and determining the effectiveness of the curriculum as a whole.

### ***Difficulty of separating content and process in a communicative syllabus***

A syllabus consists of lists of content to be taught through a course of study. Key tasks for the syllabus designer are the selection of the items, and their sequencing and integration. In writings on second language teacher education, it is possible to identify two views on the nature of syllabus design. The narrow view draws a

clear distinction between the selection and sequencing of content (the domain of syllabus design) and the selection and sequencing of learning tasks and activity (the domain of methodology). With the emergence of CLT has come a group of curriculum specialists who take a broader view, and who question the sustainability of this strict separation.

In general education, Stenhouse (1975) challenged the separation of content and process with a compelling rationale for the elevation of process (traditionally the domain of methodology) to the same status as content. His ideas found their way into language education through applied linguists such as Mike Breen (1984) and Leo van Lier (1988). (These developments are described in some detail in my 1989 book on syllabus design.) Breen used the metaphor of the journey to describe his approach to language teaching. Traditionally, he argued, content mastery was seen as the destination ('we want learners to know how to contrast the simple past and present perfect tenses'). Methodology was the route – the means whereby we reach the destination ('we'll get learners to do a set of substitution drills involving present perfect and simple past'). However, with the emergence of new views on the nature of language teaching, and a reconceptualization of what it was to know and use the language, this separation was difficult to sustain. With the emergence of a communicative, skills-based approach ('we want learners to be able to give an informal oral presentation on a subject of their choice'), a rigid separation became difficult to sustain because, if our method of achieving the target performance is to rehearse that performance in class, then the route becomes the destination. This reconceptualization changed the way that course designers and materials writers went about their jobs.

In traditional language teaching, syllabus design issues (*what* students learn) and methodology (*how* they learn) were decided with reference to the classroom rather than with reference to learners' real communicative needs in actual situations in the world outside. As a result, learners often had difficulty using what they had learned beyond the classroom. With grammar-translation and audio-lingual drills, it was often difficult for learners to make the conceptual leap from the classroom to genuine communication outside the classroom. This is not to say that drills of various kinds, and even translation tasks, have no place in the language classrooms, rather that, in and of themselves, they are insufficient.

### ***Linguistic specification as a second order activity***

In classrooms underpinned by the principles set out in the first part of the chapter, the syllabus designer begins by choosing language content and learning experiences which match the needs of learners as users of language beyond the classroom. In designing courses they are guided by specified communicative tasks that learners can perform at the end of their period of learning. In consequence, it is easier for learners to apply what they have learned in class to the challenge of communicating in the real world, and for employers to know what learners can do. In practical terms, the syllabus designer no longer begins with a structurally graded list of linguistic items, and then casts around for ways of teaching those items. Instead, he/she begins with an inventory of target skills and asks what learners need to know and be able to do in order to perform those skills. Listing, sequencing and integrating target items becomes a second order activity rather than the first thing that he/she does.



## **Approach to teaching**

### ***Transmission versus interpretation models of learning***

In traditional language classrooms, learners are taught chiefly about language and its rules. They learn facts about language rather than how to use it communicatively to express ideas, to talk and write to other people, to read and listen to real language and to learn how to cooperate with others. As we have seen, in educational systems functioning under a transmission model, the primary role of the learner is as a relatively passive recipient of knowledge. The teacher's role is to provide that knowledge by transmitting it to the learner, largely through lock-step, teacher-fronted modes of learning.

### ***High-structure versus low-structure teaching***

In a book on the management of the teaching process that I co-authored some years ago, a distinction was drawn between 'high-structure' and 'low-structure' teaching. Generally speaking, classrooms informed by current communicative views on language pedagogy will involve a change in teaching approach away from a high-structure orientation towards a more low-structure orientation. The impact of changing views about the nature of language on the teaching process was described in the following way:

The insight that communication was an integrated process rather than a set of discrete learning outcomes created a dilemma for language education. It meant that the destination (functioning in another language) and the route (attempting to learn the target language) move much closer together, and, in some instances (for example, in role plays and simulations), become indistinguishable. . . . In educational terms, a useful way of viewing this emerging dilemma in language education is in terms of high- and low-structure teaching. High-structure tasks are those in which teachers have all the power and control. Low-structure tasks are those in which power and control are devolved to the students. . . . [We believe that] an association exists between low-structure and CLT, and that the incorporation of communicative tasks with low-structure implications into the classroom increases the complexity of the decision-making process for the teacher.

(Nunan and Lamb, 1996: 16–17)

High-structure teaching situations are those in which the teacher is very much in control of the instructional process. In these situations, learners have relatively little power or control over either the content or the process of learning. Low-structure situations, on the other hand, provide learners with numerous options and a great deal of autonomy. According to Biggs and Telfer (1987: 362) all instructional decision-making can be located on a 'continuum', which has 'high-structure' decisions at one extreme, and 'low-structure' decisions at the other.

In contemporary classrooms, while direct instruction and high-structure tasks are not eschewed, much more time will be devoted to low-structure tasks. In addition, direct instruction, when it occurs, will be integrated into instructional sequences in which learners are actively involved in using the language guided and helped by their teachers. The teacher's primary role is the provision

of pedagogical opportunities through which learners might structure and restructure their own understanding. The ultimate goal is to enable the learner to communicate with others in the world beyond the classroom where they will not have a teacher on hand. In helping learners achieve this goal, however, teachers need to redefine their approach to teaching.

## Role of learners

### *Passive versus active language roles*

As we have seen, learners in classrooms characterized by a transmission model of learning are cast in a relatively passive role. They are passengers, being carried forward in the learning experience by the teacher. In language classrooms operating within such a transmission mode, learners practice patterns provided by teachers, textbooks and tapes. They are thus cast into passive, reproductive roles. Rather than learning how to use language creatively themselves, they spend most learning time copying and reproducing language written down by others. They learn how to communicate in model and predictable situations, but they don't learn how to respond appropriately in novel and authentic communicative situations. Such a drill-based pedagogical culture is most commonly associated with audiolingualism, and, although audiolingualism is supposedly dead and buried, the drill-based culture is very much alive and well, as is evident in most so-called communicative curricula.

### *Reproductive language tasks*

The following task, adapted from a recent textbook, is an example of a task that is purportedly a communicative exercise, but is, in reality, a reproductive exercise practicing comparative adjectives.

Instructions: Working with a partner, take turns asking and answering these questions. If you agree on the answer, circle the word. If you disagree, put your initials next to the answer that you think is correct.

Example:

Q: Which is taller, the Sears Building or the Empire State Building?

A: The Sears Building is taller.

- 1 Which has more sides, a pentagon or a rectangle?
- 2 Which country has more cars per person, Taiwan or Japan?
- 3 Which is closer to the equator, Singapore or Malaysia?
- 4 Which is bigger, the Earth or the Moon?
- 5 Which country has the larger population, Pakistan or the U.S.A.?
- 6 Which country has more television sets per person, Australia or Singapore?
- 7 Which planet is closer to the Earth, Venus or Mars?
- 8 Which is an older capital city, Madrid or Rome?

As I have indicated several times already, there is nothing wrong with drills, and there is certainly nothing wrong with exercises such as the one above. They are an essential ingredient in the learning process for most learners, and provide the enabling skills for later communicative performance. However, by themselves, they do not go far enough in equipping learners to communicate. In addition to reproducing language models provided by others, even in disguised forms such as the task above, learners need opportunities for creative language use. By creativity, I do not mean that we should have learners writing poetry in class (although I do feel that the use of imaginative literature could be exploited much more extensively than it is in language teaching). Rather, by creativity, I mean the recombination of familiar elements into new and previously unrehearsed forms.

### ***Encouraging creative language use***

In classrooms and textbooks in which the creativity principle is activated, learners are given structured opportunities to use the language that they have been practicing in new and unexpected ways. They are provided with the language that they will need in order to take part in genuine communicative tasks, and they are given opportunities to respond appropriately in new situations in the world outside the classroom. Tasks allow learners to practice identifying the key grammar and vocabulary in real-world texts and to develop the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening in an integrated way, just as in authentic communicative situations. Tasks also give learners practice in cooperating with other learners and with their teachers, making creative use of the language they have learned. In this way, classrooms themselves act as a bridge to the outside world rather than as a linguistic quarantine station where learners are protected from the risks involved in having to engage in genuine communication. Creative language use involves the recombination of familiar elements (words, structures and prefabricated patterns) in new ways to produce utterances that have never been produced before by that particular individual. (For that individual, they are therefore unique.) In role plays, simulations and problem solving tasks, learners are given opportunities for creative language use.

## **Approach to language**

### ***Shortcomings of grammar-translation and audiolingualism***

Grammar-translation and audiolingualism adopted very different approaches to the treatment of grammar. In fact, audiolingualism developed partly in reaction to grammar-translation's excessively deductive approach to the teaching of grammar. Audiolingual methodology was based on an inductive approach in which rules were 'caught' rather than 'taught' (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). 'Get students to learn by analogy, not analysis', 'Language is a set of habits' and 'Teach the language, not about the language' were pedagogical catch cries when audiolingualism was in full swing (Moulton, 1963).

Despite their marked differences, grammar-translation and audiolingualism did have one thing in common. They both separated the teaching of grammatical form from communicative meaning. In grammar-translation classrooms, grammar was taught as a set of rules to be memorized and repeated.

In audiolingual classrooms, learners were expected to come to an inductive

understanding of the rule through processes of analogy. In both approaches, it was difficult for learners to make connections between different parts of the grammatical system. It was also difficult to see how to apply the grammar they had learned to communicate. Words were usually learned as individual items in lists so that learners did not develop an understanding of how they were grouped by their meanings into semantic sets.

The other thing that both grammar-translation and audiolingualism shared was an assumption that acquiring a second language was a linear process, that learners learn one item at a time, mastering the simple items first, and then moving on, in a step-by-step fashion, to more complex items. However, this is an oversimplification (and, in some ways, a misrepresentation) of the way that second language grammar is actually acquired. Learners do not learn one thing, perfectly, one at a time. They learn numerous things imperfectly at the same time. They structure and restructure their understanding of the language in complex non-linear ways.

### **Teaching grammar communicatively**

In a teaching methodology that reflects what we currently know about second language acquisition, grammar and vocabulary are taught communicatively. Grammatical patterns are matched to particular communicative meanings so that learners can see the connection between form and function. Learners learn how to choose the right pattern to express the ideas and feelings that they want to express. They learn how to use grammar to express different communicative meanings. Words are grouped meaningfully and are taught through tasks involving semantic networking, concept mapping and classifying. Such a methodology enables learners to recombine the familiar in unique ways and thus achieve the creativity in language use that I described earlier in the section.

### **Using language texts**

In traditional classrooms, learners listen to and read specially written classroom texts. These texts are usually produced by textbook writers and teachers to exemplify particular grammatical points, or to teach core vocabulary items. For example, the following text is designed to teach prepositions of place ('next to', 'across from', 'between'), existential 'there', and core vocabulary associated with neighborhoods, and it is difficult to imagine a context other than a language teaching textbook in which the text could conceivably appear.

Jane's apartment building is in the center of town. Jane is very happy there because the building is in a very convenient place.

Across from the building, there's a laundromat, a bank, and a post office. Next to the building, there's a drug store and a restaurant. Around the corner from the building, there are two gas stations.

There's a lot of noise near Jane's apartment building. There are a lot of cars on the street, and there are a lot of people walking on the sidewalk all day and night.

Jane isn't very upset about the noise, though. Her building is in the center of town. It's a very busy place, but for Jane, it's a very convenient place to live.

(Molinsky and Bliss, 1989: 58)

As I pointed out earlier in the chapter, there is nothing wrong in introducing texts such as these into the classroom. They demonstrate target language items within controlled contexts. However, I do have a problem with the notion that students should be fed an exclusive diet of such texts, because they do not give learners first-hand experience of how language is used in genuine communicative situations beyond the classrooms. Learners who only ever encounter texts such as this frequently have difficulty understanding the language and the texts that are used by speakers and writers authentically in the real world.

### ***Text authenticity***

In my own teaching, learners study spoken and written texts brought into the classroom from authentic contexts outside the classroom. In fact learners are strongly encouraged to bring in their own samples of authentic language data. They practice listening to and reading genuine language drawn from a wide variety of contexts, including TV and radio broadcasts, conversations, discussions and meetings of all kinds, talks, and announcements. They read magazines, stories, printed material and instructions, hotel brochures and airport notices, bank instructions and a wide range of written messages. This practice helps them cope successfully with genuine communication outside the classroom.

While the learners that I currently teach are at upper-intermediate levels of proficiency, exercises and tasks help even the learners at lower proficiency levels to make sense of these real texts, and to develop effective learning strategies for reading and for listening, speaking and writing. Some years ago, when writing a series aimed at beginning and post-beginning learners, I was able to draw on a wide variety of authentic data, including the following:

#### *Spoken data*

casual conversations  
telephone conversations  
answering machine messages  
office conversations  
public announcements  
stories and anecdotes  
oral histories  
descriptions  
directions  
store announcements  
advertisements  
interviews

#### *Written data*

invitations  
airline tickets  
postcards  
enrollment forms  
business cards  
family trees  
classified advertisements  
airline boarding passes  
licenses  
handwritten notes  
movie reviews  
maps  
business letters  
menus

### ***Student generated data***

With appropriate guidance and support, even low-level learners can benefit from opportunities to work with everyday spoken and written texts such as these. Older learners can be given a greater sense of ownership and control over their own learning by being encouraged to bring their own authentic data into

the classroom. Bringing authentic data into the classroom can assist learners to see how grammatical forms operate in context to enable speakers and writers to make communicative meanings. Another advantage of using authentic data is that learners encounter target language items in the kinds of contexts in which they naturally occur, rather than in contexts that have been concocted by a textbook writer. Ultimately, this assists the learner because he/she will experience the language item in interaction with other closely related grammatical and discoursal elements. By distorting the contexts of use within which grammatical items occur, non-authentic language in some respects actually makes the task for the language learner more difficult.

## **Facilities for learning**

In traditional classrooms, learners usually have to rely only on the textbook as an aid to language learning. Often these textbooks are not especially well supported by interesting visuals and supporting material, and rapidly become boring and uninteresting to the learner.

### ***Textbooks and support resources***

In contemporary approaches to language teaching, the design of textbooks has become much more sophisticated. Realia and authentic data bring the content to life, and help learners make connections between the classroom world and the world beyond the classroom. In addition to classroom texts, published textbook series these days typically contain self-study workbooks, cassette tapes and videotaped materials which bring the real world into the classroom. For example, the innovative *Grammar Dimensions* series (Larsen-Freeman, 1995), which introduces a new approach to the teaching of grammar, contains the following components in addition to the student text:

- instructor's manual
- audio tape
- student workbooks
- tests
- World Wide Web site for interactive grammar and writing.

## ***Information technology and the Internet***

Increasingly, access to the Internet also brings the world into the classroom. Students can access and even download a wide range of informative, educational and entertainment information. They can also establish contact with other first and second speakers of English around the world through chat lines and pen pal links. In addition to increasing their intercultural awareness and sensitivities, this also provides them with opportunities for genuine language use beyond the classroom. Such opportunities are not always easy to find in foreign language settings, and so the explosion in Internet usage has been particularly valuable to EFL students. My own learners, once they discover and begin to tap the potential of the Internet and the World Wide Web, find it both liberating and empowering. These same students also submit their assignments and class journals to me on e-mail. In the case of the assignments, I can embed comment on

their work, and return the assignments to them, without the red ink scribbles that necessitate lengthy, time-consuming and often wasteful retyping. Having them submit their journals electronically saves class time (in the past, the last ten minutes of each class was devoted to journals), and increases the amount of time that they devote to working on their English out of class.

In his practical introduction to the use of e-mail for English teaching, Mark Warschauer (1995) gives the following examples of how the e-mail revolution has facilitated teaching and learning:

- In Hungary, students correspond daily on international discussion lists with students from Norway, the U.S., Canada, Korea, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia. They later decide to jointly publish an international student news magazine called Wings.
- ESL students in Eugene, Oregon submit their dialogue journals by e-mail rather than on paper. The students communicate much more naturally and frequently this way, and the teacher can respond much more quickly and easily.
- A teacher in New York learns she's teaching a class in English pronunciation for Spanish speakers, but she has no experience in this area. She posts a question via e-mail on an English teachers' list, and within 24 hours a half a dozen colleagues around the world have e-mailed her concrete suggestions.
- ESL pupils at a Washington DC elementary school find keypals (key-board penpals) in several other states and countries. Their attitude towards writing changes dramatically in 2 months.
- A teacher in Japan would like to teach the story 'Rip Van Winkle' but doesn't have the text. She finds it from home in ten minutes by using her personal computer and a modem connection to the Internet.
- EFL and ESL university students in Finland, Hong Kong, and the U.S. engage in an international competition to find a solution to a real-world environmental problem. They work in international teams to write technical reports, 3-year plans, and abstracts for an international environmental conference, and then vote on the winning entry and post it electronically for others around the world to see.

(Warschauer, 1995: 2-3)

These examples illustrate how new technologies can help us to activate the experiential, student-centered philosophies described earlier in the chapter.

## **Approach to learning**

### ***Learning styles and strategies***

In traditional classrooms, learners typically did not learn how to become better language learners on their own once they left a school or college. While they learned how to memorize individual words and grammatical patterns, and to practice them in contrived contexts, the underlying strategies behind the classroom tasks were rarely made explicit. As a result, students rarely learned how to make use of this stored knowledge in an organized and creative way. Ways of learning language better and more effectively were not placed onto

the pedagogical agenda, and practice was therefore often unfocused and not directed at those skills they needed to improve.

### ***Adding a process dimension***

A substantial amount of research has now been carried out into learning styles and strategies, and, in classrooms where teachers have been able to draw on this research, their students are able to develop a range of effective language learning strategies. They learn how to read and listen effectively, how to work out what texts mean, how to gather important information, how to work well in cooperation with others, how to use what they know in new and unpredictable situations, how to speak and write appropriately and so on. They also learn meta-cognitive strategies for monitoring and reflecting on their learning (Oxford, 1990). These strategies are explicitly taught as part of the curriculum, and learners are shown how to apply these strategies to their own learning outside the classroom. In this way, they learn how to become better language learners outside of formal language learning contexts.

## **Classroom organization**

### ***Teacher-fronted versus small group classrooms***

As we have seen, the traditional mode of classroom organization is a teacher-fronted one, with learners sitting in rows facing the teacher. They spent most of their time repeating and manipulating models provided by the teacher, the textbook and the tape, and developed skills in choral speaking and repeating. The physical set-up of classrooms was (and, in many schools, still is) predicated on this mode of organization, with desks set out in rows, and even in many cases screwed to the floor, thus making any other mode of organization almost impossible. Students in such classrooms do not learn how to express their own ideas and to share these ideas by communicating in small groups.

We have seen that experiential learning was underpinned by a constructivist approach to education. Such a philosophy is realized at a classroom level by cooperative, task-based learning, with learners working in small groups and pairs. Students become skilled at cooperating with others, and express their own opinions, ideas and feelings, guided by the teacher. They learn how to solve language problems in a systematic way and to decide what language to use in the different situations that their teachers present in the classroom. Role plays and simulations help to make the task-based classroom a lively and rich language environment for learners of all abilities. Tasks such as these stimulate the production of a much richer array of language functions than teacher-fronted modes of classroom organization. They also result in the negotiation of meaning, something which is largely absent in teacher-fronted tasks.

### ***Communication in the workplace***

Interestingly, these skills of communicating and cooperating in groups are also increasingly required in the workplace. Over the last few years, the old, hierarchical models of production, in which communication is a one-way, downward process from line managers to workers on the shop floor, are giving way to



small, integrated production teams in which communication occurs horizontally between members of the team.

However, many educational institutions have not kept pace with changes in the workplace and in society at large. Educational institutions are inherently conservative, and it is probably fair to say that most are still predicated on a transmission mode of education, a mode which, as we have seen, is even reflected in the physical setting of the classroom. Within such institutions there is often an ideological tussle between the dominant, transmission ideology of the institution itself, and the interpretative, constructivist approach advocated by the language teacher.

## **Assessment**

### ***Shortcomings of standardized tests***

In traditional learning environments, assessment practices are characterized by standardized tests designed, administered and graded by outside authorities. Teachers have little control over what is assessed or how it is assessed, and the examination system has a disproportionate influence over the curriculum. In such environments, learners do not develop their own ability to assess how much they have learned and how much they need to learn. As a result they often do not know exactly what they have learned and how much they still have to learn. The assessment is typically through quizzes and tests that do not reflect actual language use.

### ***Student self-assessment***

In contemporary language teaching, learners are trained systematically in ways of assessing their own learning progress. Learners learn their own strengths better, and where they need more help from the teacher. When they leave the program they can not only indicate their proficiency level in the language they have been studying, but also provide a profile of their strengths and weaknesses in many other factors that influence effective communication. In this way, learners, parents and employers can see precisely what progress has been made and what communicative tasks learners can successfully carry out. Increasingly, portfolios of work, providing concrete instances of learner achievement, are being accepted by employers and educational institutions. These records have a number of purposes. In the first place, they serve to remind learners of the content covered in the unit. Secondly, over time, they provide a record of achievement, as well as reminding learners of work still to be done. Finally, and most importantly, they develop skills in self-assessment and self-evaluation – skills which are an important ingredient in a learner-oriented instructional system. (For a detailed description and inventory of learner-oriented tasks, see Brindley, 1989.)

## **Language out of class**

In traditional classrooms, learners are rarely encouraged to make use of their language skills in the real world outside. The only practice they have is in class.

This, of course, is not surprising in foreign language contexts in which opportunities to use the language are limited. However, one of the things that characterizes 'good' language learners is their ability to find opportunities to activate their language outside of the classroom.

### **Strategies for activating language out of class**

In contemporary approaches to language teaching, learners are involved in role plays and practice simulations, and through these develop an ability to carry out creative and imaginative learning projects outside of the language classroom. These projects are carefully connected to the kinds of language tasks that they will have to perform when they complete their studies. In this way they develop independence, they learn how to function as communicators themselves and they learn to use language as a working tool to achieve their objectives outside of the classroom. In my own teaching, I try to structure out-of-class learning opportunities for students on a ratio of three to one. In other words, for every hour they spend with me, I try to find ways in which they will spend three hours outside the classroom systematically working on their language. In addition to increasing the overall quantity of language use, this sends the powerful message to the learners that they have power and control over their own learning. It also shows them that, even in foreign language situations, there are many opportunities for them to practice their language. Out-of-class tasks include the following:

- engaging in peer review sessions, in which they collaborate with a fellow student to review projects and assignments;
- conducting dialogue journals with me via the Internet;
- taking part in conversation exchanges with foreigners who want to practice their Chinese (students are paired up with foreigners, and arrange, at their own convenience, to spend 40 minutes a week in conversation – 20 minutes in English and 20 minutes in Chinese);
- projects and surveys, in which they collect information, in English, and bring it back to a subsequent class;
- doing language improvement projects in the independent learning center (in these projects they identify an aspect of their English they want to improve, formulate a learning objective, and write up a learning contract, which they carry out independently).

Other ideas for fostering independent learning outside the formal language classroom can be found in Pemberton et al. (1996) and Gardner and Miller (1996).

### **Conclusion**

In the first part of this chapter, I looked at the major ideological and empirical factors that have influenced language teaching over the last 30 years. In the second half of the chapter, I illustrated the pedagogical changes that have been brought about as a result of changing views on the nature of language and learning, and also through the incorporation into classroom teaching of insights from research. We can summarize these changes as follows:

- Learners practice skills they will need outside of the classroom.
- Learners are actively involved in using the language they are learning, and in learning through doing.
- Learners communicate authentically and learn to use language appropriately.
- Learners learn how to use grammar and vocabulary to express different communicative meanings.
- Learners listen to and read authentic texts of different kinds.
- Learners develop strategies to become better language learners.
- Learners work together in small cooperative groups.
- Learners develop skills in self-assessment and self-evaluation.
- Learners learn how to take their language into the real world beyond the classroom.
- Teachers help learners to learn useful language and to become better learners.
- Teachers provide native-speaker models of the language they are learning and share their knowledge of workplace tasks.
- Teachers actively cooperate in providing a varied program of instruction.
- Teachers continuously assess learners' performance and provide a detailed profile of their skills.

In short, these changes help learners to learn real language for use in the real world. Learners are assessed on what they can communicate and on their skills as language learners, as solvers of problems, and as communicators in groups. As a result, teachers, parents and employers know what skills learners have, and can match learners' abilities to the demands of particular tasks and jobs. This experiential, task-oriented approach is more than just a means of learning a language: it is a way of becoming a better communicator in the workplace, and in the social world beyond the classroom.

Table 3.3 summarizes the major shifts that have taken place in language pedagogy over the last 30 years.

*Table 3.3 The traditional and the contemporary in language education*

	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Contemporary</i>
Syllabus design	Content and methodology decided with reference to the classroom rather than with reference to learners' real communicative needs.	In addition to the features set out in the left-hand column . . . Content and methodology match learner needs beyond the classroom.
Approach to teaching (methodology)	Learners are taught about language and its rules, learning facts about language rather than how to use it communicatively.	Learners are actively involved in using language.
Role of the learners	Learners spend their time copying and reproducing language written down by others.	Learners learn how to use language creatively, responding in novel and authentic communicative situations.

Approach to language	Grammar is taught as rules to be memorized.	Grammar and vocabulary are taught communicatively so learners can use the grammar to express different communicative meanings.
Using language texts	Learners listen to and read specially written classroom texts. They have difficulty dealing with authentic texts outside the classroom.	Learners study authentic texts and learn to use genuine language outside the classroom.
Resources for learning	Learners have to rely only on the textbook as an aid to language learning.	Learners use specially written, well-illustrated textbooks plus self-study workbooks, cassette tapes and videotaped materials.
Approach to learning	Learners don't learn how to become better language learners on their own.	Learners learn a range of effective language learning strategies and are shown how to apply these strategies to their own learning outside the classroom.
Classroom organization	Learners sit in rows facing the teacher and spend most of their time repeating what the teacher says. They don't learn how to express their own ideas.	Learners work in small groups and pairs, learning skills of cooperating with others and how to express their own opinions, ideas and feelings.
Assessment	Teacher alone assesses the student's progress. Learners do not develop ability to assess what they have learned.	Learners trained to assess their own learning progress, and can identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

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In summary, the ideology driving the view of education presented here is that learners have a right to be involved in curriculum decision-making, that is, selecting content, learning activities and tasks. It is also predicated on a belief that learners learn best if the content relates to their own experience and knowledge. At the level of implementation, there is a belief that learners who have developed skills in 'learning how to learn' are the most effective students, and that learners have different learning styles and strategies which need to be taken into consideration in developing learning programs.

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## CHAPTER 4

# SEVEN HYPOTHESES ABOUT LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

At the end of my year as President of TESOL, I gave a plenary at the TESOL Association's annual convention, which that year was held in Vancouver. The plenary gave me an opportunity to review the ways in which looking at language pedagogy from the learners' perspective, and gaining insights into pedagogy through learner narratives, helped shape my attitudes and beliefs about language learning and teaching. In the presentation, these beliefs were framed as seven hypotheses.

Presidential plenary, International TESOL Convention, Vancouver, March 2000

I'm going to start my presentation by telling you probably more than you need to know about giving plenaries. The task of producing a plenary generally starts with a request for a title. In this case, I came up with 'Seven hypotheses about language teaching and learning'. It seemed a pretty nifty title at the time.

Months later, when I sat down to produce the substance of the talk, I couldn't for the life of me remember what I'd planned to say. I might just as well have called it 'Gone with the wind' (or 'Titanic', perhaps), because that's where my hypotheses had gone. So, with no hypotheses, what could I do? What did I have that would hold your attention for the next hour? At the time, I had started working on the language learning histories of some of my learners, and what they had to say seemed pretty interesting. I thought I might share some of these stories with you today, and so I'm going to take the liberty of changing the title of the talk to 'Seven stories about language learning and teaching'.

What I want to do in this presentation is to explore the question: What can the pedagogical lives of our learners tell us about language learning, and what are the implications of what they tell us for language teaching? And I want to do so by telling you seven stories: from Alice, Grace, Luis, Ing, Josephine, Sandy and Siu Fun. (All names have been changed, by the way, to protect the innocent.)

The database for the presentation is my own records of talking to learners over many years, and an ongoing longitudinal study that I'm doing with two colleagues: Lillian Wong and Phil Benson. We've been collaborating for several

years now, collecting the language learning histories of our students at the University of Hong Kong. Through this research, we have explored the question of what learner accounts of their own histories as language learners can tell us about processes of language acquisition and development, and how these accounts can help us do our own work more effectively.

The first two learners I'd like to introduce you to are Alice and Grace. Their stories are from my distant past, the early 1970s, when audiolingualism still had us by the pedagogical jugular. I'd only been teaching for a couple of years, and was still feeling my way. At the time, some of my younger teaching colleagues and I were attempting to escape the dominant audiolingual methodology of the day by getting learners involved in acquiring language by using it for authentic purposes in the classroom. We'd invented communicative language teaching for ourselves without knowing it.

In order to bring our students along with us, we were careful to explain the rationale for what we were doing, and to find out what our students thought of these new ideas. I had always instinctively taken my pedagogical bearings from my students, and was fascinated by their stories from inside and outside of the classroom, so that it was natural for me to get the students' perspectives on these new ways of learning.

However, for many weeks, I found it impossible to get much out of Alice and Grace – two painfully shy identical twins who went everywhere together and who were extremely quiet. One day, one of the twins was absent – I've no idea which one it was – but I saw my opportunity to start a conversation. After class I went up to the twin, and said to her: 'So, how are you enjoying the English class?' Looking terrified, she leapt from her seat and headed for the door. 'Where are you going?' I asked. 'To ask my sister,' she replied.

Later in the course, one of the girls – I think it was Grace – did develop the confidence to respond to my questions. One day, we'd done a role play that I thought had gone well, and I asked Grace about it. She shook her head. 'No like role play.' What about your sister? 'She no like role play.'

I went home that day in a state of depression for two reasons. In the first place, my attempts to incorporate a more communicative approach into my classroom were meeting with only marginal success. On the other hand, my attempts at teaching grammar didn't seem to be particularly successful either. We had spent a lot of class time practicing negation in the context of likes and dislikes – 'He likes . . . I don't like . . . She likes . . . You don't like . . . We like . . . He doesn't like . . . They like . . . She doesn't like . . .' My students were great at manipulating the forms in class, but then in communication they used forms they'd certainly never learned from me. No teacher or textbook that I'd ever come across taught 'No like this' or 'No like that'. However, I noticed students all around me using this and other forms that they had never been taught. Mismatches and asymmetries between teaching and learning were all around me, and yet I'd never really paid this any attention – nor was it anything that I'd ever been taught when I was training to be a teacher. In fact, I was taught that, if learners made errors, then I must be doing something wrong. And that was the lesson I got from the stories of Alice and Grace – I wasn't doing it right.

My third learner also inhabited my early pedagogical life. His name was Luis. Luis was one of the most gifted and charming students I ever had – a joy to have in class, and always ready to help weaker learners. He was one of those students who is always ready to have a go in class. Although concerned to get it right, he



wasn't afraid to make mistakes. One day, we were practicing identifying possessions – 'Is this your pencil?' 'Is that her bag?' The lesson went well, and I was feeling pleased with myself as I left the classroom. On this particular day, I was driving my brother's rather fancy car, rather than the beaten-up bicycle that was my usual mode of transportation – he'd asked me to take it to the garage for him, as it was near the school. As I drove through the school gates, I saw Luis walking along the street, and stopped to give him a ride. He was most surprised to see me driving a fancy car rather than my bicycle, and as he got into the car his eyes lit up. He looked from me to the car and said 'Teacher car?' Again, I ended up in a state of depression, as the effect of my instruction appeared to be making the learners worse, not better.

My fourth story comes from a somewhat different creature from the first three. This is -ing. You all know -ing because in fact she isn't a learner but a grammatical morpheme. And this story doesn't come from me. For it, I'm indebted to a former colleague in Australia, Malcolm Johnston, who spent many years getting -ing and her relatives to tell him their stories.

In the 1980s, Johnston collected and analyzed a large corpus of naturalistic language from second language learners who were at different stages of proficiency. Using this database he was able to trace the development of a number of grammatical features. Learning, in Johnston's terms, is an active, constructive process, as opposed to just attempting to copy the teacher, the textbook or the tape. Acting like a linguistic detective, Johnston discovered that learners' understanding of target language items evolves through complex, overlapping and recursive stages that do not mirror native language usage. He also showed that learners and the processes through which they acquire languages are far more complex than is assumed by most language teaching methods and approaches.

In this talk, I'll restrict my focus to what Johnston found out about '-ing'.

For beginners, he found that the only consistent thing about the use of '-ing' is that it is attached to words that appear to be verbs. He argues that the unambiguous marking of action words is an important step in enabling learners to get past the initial stage of using single words and formulaic utterances. But why should the learners choose '-ing' and not some other verbal marker? Johnston suggests that, of the various morphological markers available in English, '-ing' is the one that is most easily identified because it is a syllable, and is phonetically simple.

So, at the outset, here we have learners who are taught the use of '-ing' as a marker of progressivity or continuity, but who use it as an indicator of action. At first, they don't discriminate between the different kinds of utterance in which the '-ing' marking is applied. As time goes on, however, they begin to restrict the use of '-ing' to certain contexts. Surprisingly, Johnston found that the predominant context for '-ing' was the past tense context. So, from being a general action or verb marker, '-ing' begins to function as a past tense marker.

At the next stage of development, Johnston's learners used '-ing' to mark the verb in subordinate clauses and with verbal complements. At this point, Johnston says, you might be tempted to stop and ask: 'How can you call this crazy pattern "development"?' He goes on to say:

Crazy as this new behaviour might seem, there may be a simple explanation. . . . [T]he use of '-ing' in past contexts and subordinate clauses is really an extension of the original use of '-ing' as a verb marker, and is a way

of making utterances understandable by providing learners with reference points for the development of more complex structures.

(Johnston, 1987)

So, what are the lessons to be learned from the stories of Alice, Grace, Luis and ‘-ing’? Firstly, they dramatize the asymmetrical relationship between teaching and learning. Secondly, they illustrate the idea that language development is not linear but is organic. Learners don’t learn one thing perfectly one at a time – they learn numerous things imperfectly all at once, and their understanding and usage evolve through complex interrelated sets of stages (Nunan, 1999). The stories begin to provide us with possible answers to the question posed by Dick Allwright (1984) – ‘Why don’t learners learn what teachers teach?’ There are numerous practical implications of this asymmetry. Firstly, don’t panic when the learners don’t ‘get it’. As the poet Robert Frost said, ‘the trick to education is to get students to hang around long enough till they catch on’. Secondly, learners do behave systematically – the seemingly crazy patterns that appear at certain stages in the learning process do have their own developmental logic. Thirdly, learners notice things that native speakers can afford to ignore. And, finally, the internal processes through which learners acquire a second language, as evidenced by the language they produce are various stages, are consistent with experiential, constructivist models of learning.

The first four stories have focused on aspects of language content. The ones that follow have more to do with learning processes. The first of these is the story of Josephine. Josephine is one of my students at the University of Hong Kong who is taking part in a longitudinal study into the ways in which learners conceptualize and transform their understanding of language and language learning. Josephine was a special student – in contrast with most of our students, she loved English despite many years of traditional instruction in high school. The samples of language I collected from her over the first semester showed her making dramatic progress, and I was interested in finding out how she did it. One day, we both happened to be crossing the campus at the same time, and the following conversation ensued:

‘Hi Josephine – how are things?’

‘Fine.’

‘I wanted to have a chat with you about your English.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘It’s coming along fantastically well, don’t you think?’

‘Yes.’

‘You must be very pleased with yourself.’

‘I am.’

‘Yes, I must be doing something right,’ I said, in a rather self-congratulatory way.

At this point she stopped, half turned and looked at me quizzically. ‘Oh, it isn’t you,’ she said.

‘It isn’t?’

‘No, I don’t think so. I think it’s my Canadian roommate.’

In collecting the language learning histories of our Hong Kong students, Lilian Wong, Phil Benson and I found a great deal of evidence to support the

notion that learners are active participants in their own learning processes. (See also Benson and Lor, 1999.) This was evident in many of the narratives that we collected. It became clear that, while there was a cultural overlay to what goes on in the classroom, what was considered as 'legitimate' activity was also conditioned by a range of other factors, particularly by the attitudes, beliefs and practices of individual learners. We also found many mismatches between the beliefs and attitudes of the learners and the practices of their teachers. This was so even for practices that were important for successful language development such as the extent to which use of the target language in class was encouraged or even permitted. In some English classes, English itself was rarely used. In others, students reported being fined if they used their first language. Both practices had (predictably) negative consequences.

My next learner is Sandy. Sandy was a smart, first-year student, and, unlike Alice and Grace, she wasn't shy. When asked to compare and contrast her experiences of learning English at high school with university, she said:

When I was in secondary school, I seldom asked questions. The reason was that the teacher always tried to explain the stuffs as detailed as possible, leaving no queries among students. Only the most curious student will ask questions. This method is well known as the spoon-feeding education system in which we are fed with piles of notes and textbooks. On the other hand, students (especially some dumb one like me) only care about getting results good enough to enter a university. Students gradually become examination oriented. Eventually less and less students care about acquiring knowledge, which should be the aim of education. But in universities, things are totally different. Lecturers only give a brief talk on the topics, leave a huge area for students to explore by themselves. This means that spoon-feed system no longer exists. Students cannot rely on the knowledge acquired in lectures.

When asked to spell out the actual strategies used by her high school teacher, she said:

I learn English in school by, just by doing some exercises on the class or homework. And when we prepare for the exam, we just do all the past paper and that's all, no special learning. . . . We have different approach if we have different teachers, some teacher will take primary [elementary] school approach. She will let you read a text and then tell you to underline some difficult words and then you have to jot them in a book and we did not like this way because we are not babies. For some teachers they will just give you . . . we have a textbook and then she will tell us to do the exercise inside that.

The interviewer asked: 'Did you like that way?'

And Sandy replied: 'No.' She laughed. 'Because we don't know what we are doing. In fact, I'm in, I was in the same school as Trudy [another of our informants] and all more less the same. Drills every day, no fun at all.'

At this point, Trudy, who had been listening in, said: 'No fun at all, yes. Yeah, I am at the same school as Sandy. Even in English lesson, we don't speak English.'

In all of our data, we found little evidence to support the notion that Asian students are by inclination 'relentless rote learners!' who are incapable of reflecting on their learning. Students, even self-styled 'dumb' ones like Sandy, knew what it took to make the system work for them.

It is clear from the narratives of our learners that in order to create appropriate learning environments for them we need to know where they're coming from. During one 12-week period, Sandy and a group of her fellow students took part in a program designed to help them reflect on their own learning, develop their knowledge of and ability to apply learning strategies, assess their own progress, and apply their language skills beyond the classroom. I got the learners to keep reflective journals of their language learning experiences. Over the 12-week period, several interesting themes emerged. There was a gradual shift over the course of the study from a linguistic focus to a more 'communicative' and applied focus. Students began to see language less as an object to be studied than as a tool to be used. Student comments began to take on a more 'process' rather than 'product' orientation as they began to reflect on *how* they learned as much as on *what* they learned.

We also found that the very act of asking questions led to change. For example, we asked the students to make a note of when they used English outside of their English class. The simple fact of reflecting on the question seemed to sensitize students to the opportunities for communicating outside of the classroom and, indeed, outside the university. It also seemed to encourage them actively to seek out such opportunities.

Siu Fun is the next learner I'd like to introduce you to. Her story is an interesting one, and in telling her story she exhibited all of the attributes of the active, life-long learner. When she was in school, she loved English, but she quickly came to realize that learning English in school wasn't enough. So she found opportunities to practice her English out of class. While opportunities to practice listening, reading and, to a certain extent, writing were relatively easy to come by, speaking was a much greater challenge. Siu Fan used to hang around the tourist traps after school, and waylay unsuspecting tourists with questions to which she already knew the answers. (This enabled her to map what she already knew experientially onto what she was struggling to learn linguistically.) She also created a conversation exchange. She and several of her friends found native speakers of English who wanted to practice their Cantonese. They each then arranged to meet with one of the respondents for 40–50 minutes each week. They would spend 10 minutes conversing in English, switch to Cantonese for the next 10 minutes, back to English for the next 10 minutes, and so on, until their allotment of time was used up.

The learners I've talked about today all differed markedly in their attitudes and beliefs about what it is to be a language learner and user. I realize that, in many ways, most of them may be atypical. But at this stage in our work we aren't looking for averages, norms or generalizability, and we aren't interested in populations and samples. In fact, we're happy to celebrate through our work the particular, the atypical, the unique. If you want to argue that this is storytelling not research, then I invite you to go debate the issue with Donald Freeman, another of the featured speakers at this convention, or with Shirley Brice Heath, one of the most celebrated researchers and storytellers in our field. In fact, we drew inspiration from Heath's own approach to research. In critiquing the dominant research paradigm, she argued that:

Often the approaches to research in education have been quantitative, global, sociodemographic, and dependent on large-scale comparisons of many different schools. Terms from business predominate: input, output, accountability, management strategies etc. . . . Pieces of data about social groups, such as number of siblings or time of mother-child interaction in preschool daily experiences, are correlated with the output of students expressed as test scores, subsequent income, and continued schooling. The effects of formal instruction have been evaluated by correlating these input factors with educational output.

She goes on to say:

. . . the irony of such research is that it ignores the social and cultural contexts which created the input factors for individuals and groups. Detailed descriptions of what actually happens to children as they learn to use language and form their values about its structures and functions tell us what children do to become and remain acceptable members of their own communities.

(Heath, 1983: 7-8)

Each of the seven learners I've introduced today brought into my classroom their own unique histories. And they all reacted differently to the challenges of learning another language. When the formal classroom proved inadequate to Josephine's needs, she went beyond the classroom to get the data and experiences she needed for improving her speaking. Sandy rejected the methods used by her teacher because they didn't reflect the ways that she felt she learned best. Siu Fan also had a proactive strategy for fulfilling her learning needs beyond the classroom.

In making sense of our learners' stories, we came to realize that their current attitudes to, beliefs about, and approaches to language learning represented particular moments in their lives as language learners, and that these were contextualized within interpretations of particular experiences of learning particular languages in particular social and educational contexts. Without knowing the context, it was difficult to ascribe deeper significance to the stories. We also found an interesting tension between the ideology of the school system and the evolution of our subjects as learners. The educational system in Hong Kong – at least the one that our students encountered – is predicated very much on a traditional 'transmission' model. In the early years of learning English, this is reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of the learners. However, at about midway through their secondary school, the students began to report a change in their attitude towards the language they were learning and themselves as learners. They gradually became aware that English is a means of communication. This often took the form of the realization that English is important to their academic success and future prospects in the world. This realization in turn seemed to be quite closely connected to the initiation of self-directed learning strategies. (It is at this point that learners became aware of the opportunities for learning and using English outside of the classroom, and they reported reading, listening to songs, watching movies and so on.) One informant reported to us: 'You only have to look up to learn English in Hong Kong.' From the data, it seems that there is some kind of developmental process going on, and that self-direction

is dependent on a certain conception of learning. So while the school system remained rooted in a traditional 'transmission' mode that sees the function of education as preserving, adding to and transmitting knowledge and values – in a word, to preserve and transmit the dominant culture – the students themselves began to adopt an experiential approach to language development.

As teacher educators, our challenge is to convince teachers that we can learn a great deal from listening to our learners. We have to listen to what they don't say as well as to what they do say. We have to listen to the language they use as well as to the language they don't use. We have to notice the ways in which they transform the language data and learning experiences that we provide for them.

My learners and their stories provide strong anecdotal support for an experiential view of learning. As I ran and reran these stories through the filter of my own background as a learner and a teacher, it seemed to me that out of these stories I could, indeed, propose a number of hypotheses. You shouldn't be surprised to learn that there are seven of these.

Within the context of the experiential view of learning that I have just outlined:

- 1 learning will be enhanced if the curriculum acknowledges that learners will reinterpret, and transform input from the teacher, the textbook and the tape;
- 2 learning will be enhanced if the curriculum acknowledges that the relationship between teaching and learning is asymmetrical – in short, that learners do not learn what teachers teach in a linear, additive fashion;
- 3 learning will be enhanced if learners are given opportunities to contribute their own ideas, experiences and feelings to the learning process;
- 4 learning will be enhanced if there is a focus on learning processes and well as the language content;
- 5 learning will be enhanced if the curriculum acknowledges that there are different routes to success, and teachers recognize that it is their responsibility to help learners find their own best ways;
- 6 learning will be enhanced if learners are given opportunities to negotiate aspects of their learning;
- 7 learning will be enhanced if the curriculum reflects the fact that language acquisition is complex, organic and inherently unstable.

As we create learning experiences and opportunities for our learners, we need to keep in mind the fact that the 'one size fits all' philosophy just won't do. As Earl Stevick has reminded us, we should beware of building a system of teaching around one type of learner. Based on his own collection of stories from language learners (and guess how many there were? – our magic number seven: Gwen, Derek, Bert, Carla, Ed, Frieda and Ann), Stevick asks:

What would happen if a Gwen on the basis of outstanding personal accomplishments in language learning, or a Derek because of some brilliant intellectual formulation, or an Ann through force of personality, or one of the others in some other way, suddenly came into a position to set a new trend in language teaching methodology. What would such a methodology be like? Would Bert have learners repeating and paraphrasing with little or no

translation or explanation? Would Carla insist that people go out and associate with friendly native speakers who knew how to limit their language for foreigners? Would Ed have everyone reading aloud, or would Derek set a generation of students to constructing their own charts of nouns and verb inflections? Surely any such methods would be partially successful, but each would also contain the seeds of defeat for some students.

He goes on to point out that:

One after another, successive innovators have cast and recast 'the learner' in their own image. Even an individual teacher may act as if all students really should be like himself at his best, or perhaps like his most illustrious alumni. So I will remember Diller's warning about the temptation to take one experience or one small set of principles and push that experience or that set of principles too 'long and far'. Whenever someone offers me a new technique or asks me to embrace yet another approach, I will ask myself, 'How would this fit -----?' And into the blank I will substitute first Ann, then Bert, then Carla and Derek and Ed and Frieda and Gwen.

(Stevick, 1989: 150–151)

I'm sure there are some among you who are tempted to question – if not dismiss entirely – my seven hypotheses because they have emerged from the pedagogical lives of learners. 'Mere storytelling!' I hear some of you say.

Let me read you something that Terry Denny said about storytelling and educational research:

Storytelling is an attempt to employ ancient conceptualizations . . . focused on directly observable referents. We now have Newtonians in educational research – no Einsteins – carrying on 4th decimal place ethnography before getting the rudimentary realities in place. This much I propose for general agreement: without good documentation, good story telling, we'll never get good educational theory, which we desperately need. . . . I claim story telling can contribute to our understanding of problems in education and teachers can help. Folks are forever calling for and proposing nifty solutions to problems never understood. Story telling is unlikely to help in the creation or evaluation of educational remedies, but can facilitate problem definition. Problem definition compared to problem solving in an underdeveloped field in education.

(Denny, 1978: 3)

From a professional lifetime of encouraging learners to tell their stories, I can validate what Denny has to say. The stories that my learners have shared with me over the years have helped me to identify, define and refine the problems and challenges of facilitating language acquisition in instructional contexts. They have also helped me to shape responses to those challenges in ways that were not dreamed of in the books on which I cut my professional teeth. Finally, they have provided me with a basis, if not for framing a pedagogical theory, then for suggesting a number of hypotheses that can be contested against the realities of classroom life.

Although I only had time to share seven stories with you today, I hope you

agree that it isn't important to hear our learners' stories – it's essential. There hasn't been a single learner story that hasn't made me think twice about what I do in the classroom.

Let me end by reading you comments selected at random from some of my other informants:

'For me, learning English is like a bath – you have to soak in it a long time.'

'When I was a kid, I didn't know it was England's language. I thought the world only had two languages – English and Chinese.'

'In secondary school, we had many exams, and I became afraid of English. It was like floods and beasts.'

'In Year 7, I got an Australian teacher, and my English became bad. She couldn't speak properly.'

'We got no reason to speak English. It is ridiculous. Nobody speaks English in Hong Kong.'

'In Hong Kong, just lift your head and you can learn English.'

'My favorite teacher taught us to speak. He didn't emphasize grammar. The other teachers thought he was lazy, but I thought it was a really good way to learn English.'

'I went to English camp in China. We were supposed to speak English all the time. I got caught speaking Chinese and had to work like a slave to clean the toilets. This improved my English.'

Is there a pithy point to what I've had to say today? Perhaps the final word should go to the playwright Oscar Wilde, who observed that 'Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.'

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## CHAPTER 5

# CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN LEARNING AND INSTRUCTION

A perennial concern for language researchers and teachers is the gap between the curriculum as plan and the curriculum as outcome. This chapter explores the mismatch between the pedagogical intentions and plans of the educational institution, curriculum, teacher, and textbook, and the outcomes as realized through the skills and knowledge that learners take away from instructional encounters. Although there will never be a one-to-one relationship between teaching and learning, there are ways in which teachers and learners and teaching and learning can be brought closer together.

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In the chapter, I look at ways of closing the gap in relation to experiential content, learning process, and language content. The theme holding these three disparate domains together is that of learner-centeredness, and it is this concept which I take as my point of departure.

Before giving my interpretation of the concept of learner-centeredness, I should like to explain how I became interested in the subject. Many years ago I began to realize that there was a major gap between what I was focusing on as a teacher and what my learners were taking away from the pedagogical opportunities I was providing. I therefore became obsessed with a question so admirably framed by Allwright (1984): ‘Why don’t learners learn what teachers teach?’ (p. 3).

This article offers some clues as to where the answer might be found. I also provide practical examples of ways in which the ideas might be applied to teaching situations. However, I should also add that I am not claiming that all of these ideas are feasible and relevant to all contexts and situations. The context in which any teaching takes place will have a major influence on what is both feasible and desirable. However, the belief that ‘it would never work here’ is often used as an excuse for inaction.

### **The concept of learner-centeredness**

The first concept I should like to look at is that of learner-centeredness. As I have explained elsewhere (see, e.g., Nunan, 1988), a learner-centered curriculum will

contain similar components to those contained in traditional curricula. However, the key difference is that, in a learner-centered curriculum, key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed will be made with reference to the learner. Information about learners, and, where feasible, from learners, will be used to answer the key questions of what, how, when, and how well.

However, it is a mistake to assume that learners come into the language classroom with an inherent ability to make choices about what and how to learn. I believe that there are relatively few learners who are naturally endowed with the ability to make informed choices about what to learn, how to learn it, and when to learn. It is at this point that we need to turn from the concept of learner-centeredness to a closely related concept of learning-centeredness. A learning-centered classroom carries learners toward the ability to make critical pedagogical decisions by systematically training them in the skills they need to make such decisions. Such a classroom is constituted with complementary aims. Whereas one set of aims focuses on language content, the other focuses on the learning process. Learners are therefore systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. Rather than assuming that the learner comes to the learning arrangement with critical learning skills, the sensitive teacher accepts that many learners will only begin to develop such skills during the course of instruction.

Learner-centeredness is therefore not an all-or-nothing concept; it is a relative matter. It is also not the case that a learner-centered classroom is one in which the teacher hands over power, responsibility, and control to the students from Day 1. I have found that it is usually well into a course before learners are in a position to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn, and it is not uncommon that learners are in such a position only at the end of the course. That said, I would advocate the development of curricula and materials which encourage learners to move toward the fully autonomous end of the pedagogical continuum.

## **The experiential content domain**

In this section, I should like to look briefly at reasons for the gap between teaching and learning in the experiential content domain. This will provide the basis for a more detailed discussion on what we might do about it.

I should like to argue that the principal reason for the mismatch between teachers and learners, which gives rise to a disparity between what is taught and what is learned, is a mismatch between the pedagogical agenda of the teacher and that of the learner. While the teacher is busily teaching one thing, the learner is very often focusing on something else. This mismatch has been noted by numerous researchers with an interest in the classroom processes (see, e.g., Allwright, 1987; Allwright and Bailey, 1991).

More recently, Slimani (1992) has sought to determine what individual learners claim to have learned from interactive classroom events (this claimed learning she terms 'uptake'). She examines what happens in a lesson that can account for this uptake. Her learners were a group of Algerian learners of English as a foreign language who were preparing to undertake engineering studies in English. Slimani found that topics initiated in the classroom by the learners were

much more likely to be nominated as having been learned than those nominated by the teacher. In other words, when learners had an opportunity to contribute to the content of the lesson, that was the content which learners would claim to have learned. Slimani (1992) reports that:

about 77.45 per cent of the topicalisation was effected by the teacher. This is not particularly surprising in view of the fact that the discourse was unidirectionally controlled by the teacher. . . . What appears to be strikingly interesting though is that a further analysis of the effect of the teacher's versus the learners' scarce opportunities . . . for topicalisation showed that the latter offered much higher chances for items to be uptaken. Learners benefited much more from their peers' rare instance of topicalisation than from the teacher's. . . . [T]opics initiated by learners attracted more claims from the learners than the ones initiated by the teacher.

(p. 211)

Block (1994, 1996) provides further insights into the perceptual gap between teachers and learners. Working in an EFL situation, Block used an oral diary technique, in which a teacher and six of her learners provided daily audiotaped accounts of the lesson. In particular, they were asked for their point of view on the activities that stood out most, the purpose of the activities, what the student learned, what the teacher did to facilitate the learning process, and other events from the class worth mentioning. The oral diary accounts were supplemented by classroom observations and interviews.

Block discovered that, whereas certain perceptions were shared by all informants, the accounts differed in certain significant ways. Block suggests that each learner comes to class with a 'hobby horse', that is, a particular pedagogical preoccupation that colors his/her perceptions as to what is going on, why, and what value it has. One learner, for example, was preoccupied with the utilization of class time and evaluated all tasks in terms of whether they utilized class time effectively. Block also provides evidence of a gap in the perception of the teacher and the students. The major gap appeared to revolve around perceptions (and misperceptions) of the pedagogical purpose of activities. Students often either had misperceptions about the rationale for the task or had no idea at all why they were being asked to do particular tasks. The teacher, on the other hand, was able to provide a rationale, although this was not spelled out to the students.

I believe that the gap between teaching and learning in the experiential content domain can be narrowed by moving toward the implementation of a learner-centered approach to pedagogy. As I indicated earlier, learner-centeredness is not an all-or-nothing concept. I would like to suggest that there are degrees of learner-centeredness, that there is a continuum, from relatively modest to rather radical levels of implementation. In the rest of this section, I discuss some of the practical things we can do in the classroom to realize the concept of learner-centeredness. How far along the continuum one moves will depend on the pedagogical context in which one is working. Where feasible, I illustrate, with practical examples, some of the ways in which these ideas can be realized in the classroom tasks and materials. I should stress, however, that these examples are meant to be illustrative not exhaustive.

In the experiential content domain, I would suggest that the first step along the path to learner-centeredness would be to make learners aware of the goals and

the content of the curriculum, learning program, or pedagogical materials. This may not seem particularly radical. However, in my recent study of classroom interaction, there was only one instance in which the teacher began a lesson by laying out the pedagogical terrain to be covered (see Nunan, 1996). Failure to spell out lesson objectives was also noted by Block (1994, 1996). Making salient the goals of a lesson or unit of work is relatively easy to achieve regardless of whether one is teaching to a state-mandated curriculum with materials supplied, whether one is teaching to an examination, or whether one is teaching in a foreign language situation in which students may be required to undertake another language whether they want to or not. There is evidence, in fact, that interest and motivation are enhanced when the purpose and rationale of instruction are made explicit to the learners (see, e.g., Brindley, 1984).

The following is an extract from an intensive EFL course in Australia for mainly pre-intermediate-level Japanese adults in which the teacher does set the agenda for the learners. The teacher is using a mandated textbook in which the goals and objectives are implicit, and yet she is able to make the goals of the lesson explicit to the learners. She does so by actively involving them in the process rather than simply informing them.

T: Today we're going to practice talking about likes and dislikes, and we're going to talk about music and movies and stuff, OK? OK, Kenji? Now, I want you to open your books at page 22, that's where the unit starts, and [inaudible comment from student]. . . . What's that? . . . Yeah, that's right. Now, I want you to look quickly through the unit and find one example, one example, of someone saying they like something, and one example of someone saying they don't like something? OK? One example of each. And I'm going to put them here on the board.

If one is producing one's own materials or adapting those written by others, it is relatively easy to make the goals explicit. Once again, learners can be actively involved, as the following example shows:

#### Unit goals

In this unit you will:

- 1 Make comparisons:  
The city is busier than the country.
- 2 Ask for and give advice:  
I've missed the bus. What should I do?

The unit could be completed by asking the learners to carry out a self-checking exercise such as the following. Although this has been extracted from a commercial source, it is the sort of exercise that teachers can readily create.

Review the language skills you practiced in this unit. Check [✓] your answers.  
CAN YOU?

Make comparisons?

[ ] yes [ ] a little [ ] not yet  
Find or give an example:

Ask for and give advice?  
[ ] yes [ ] a little [ ] not yet  
Find or give an example:  
(Nunan, 1994: 108)

I believe that the idea of making the pedagogical agenda explicit to the learners is something which can be done to various degrees with all but the youngest of learners and those at the very beginning proficiency levels.

The different levels of learner involvement in the experiential content domain are summarized in Table 5.1.

At the second level, learners themselves would be involved in selecting goals and content. Whether it is possible or desirable to implement this level and succeeding levels of the continuum will very much depend on the context and situation in which one is teaching, something upon which I shall have more to say later. There are several well-documented accounts in which learners have been involved in making choices about what they will learn. Dam and Gabrielsen (1988) found that even relatively young learners were capable of making decisions about the content and processes of their own learning. Learners, regardless of their aptitude or ability, were capable of a positive and productive involvement in selecting their own content and learning procedures. Furthermore, learners were also positive in accepting responsibility for their own learning.

Further along the learner-centered continuum, we would see learners modifying and adapting goals and content. The next step would see learners creating their own goals and content. An interesting and practical way of involving learners at this level is reported in Parkinson and O’Sullivan (1990), who were working with high intermediate-level adult learners in an ESL context. They report on the notion of the Action Meeting as a way of involving learners in modifying course content.

A mechanism was needed for course management: as the guiding and motivating force behind the course, it would have to be able to deal with individual concerns and negotiate potential conflicts of interest, need, and temperament. It would also have to satisfy the individual while not threatening the group’s *raison d’être*. As foreshadowed in the orientation phase, the group would now experiment with a mechanism suggested by the teachers, namely a series of Action Meetings. . . . [These] would

*Table 5.1* Learner-centeredness: levels of implementation in the experiential content domain

<i>Level</i>	<i>Learner action</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the program.
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals and objectives from a range of alternatives on offer.
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program.
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives.
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom.

provide an opportunity for individuals to participate (interpersonally and interculturally) in an English-medium meeting, negotiating meaning and authentic content. They would also be a means of facilitating group cohesion and motivation and would be a primary mechanism for ongoing program evaluation by the participants.

(pp. 119–120)

The final level is one in which learners transcend the classroom and link content to the world beyond the classroom. Some years ago, I investigated the notion of the good foreign language learner. What I wanted to find out was whether learners who had developed high levels of competence in a foreign language had certain learning experiences in common. Although I found quite a variety of learning experiences at the level of classroom strategies, virtually all learners demonstrated an ability to relate the content of the classroom to the world beyond the classroom (Nunan, 1989, 1991). Furthermore, they all identified this ability as the critical ingredient in their success as language learners. This idea of the importance of consciously developed activation of the language beyond the classroom is also reported in an L2 context by Schmidt and Frota (1986).

In practical terms, it is obviously much easier to encourage learners to activate their language outside of the classroom in L2 contexts (for practical examples, see Aiken and Pearce, 1994) and situations where English is widely spoken within the community (such as in Hong Kong). However, even in foreign language contexts, it is possible to find ways of practicing the target language outside the classroom. In the good foreign language learner study mentioned above (Nunan, 1989, 1991), in which virtually all 44 informants said that success was partly due to activating language outside the classroom, learners exploited a range of resources. These included English language newspapers, radio and television, international hotels and airline offices, multinational companies, and international airports.

The following classroom extract illustrates the way in which one teacher encouraged students to think about activating their language outside of the classroom. The class was a mixed-proficiency group of adult ESL learners in Australia.

[The students are sitting in small groups of two to four as the teacher addresses them.]

T: Well students, as you know, this morning we're going to be looking at ways that we can help learners improve their English without a teacher, without, umm, a class to come to. What've we got all around us that can help us? Well the first thing that we're going to be looking at are these things. [She bends down and picks up a plastic shopping bag.] Now in the bag – I've got a bag full of mystery objects in here – different things, but they all have one thing in common. We can use them to help improve our language. Now this is going to be lucky dip type activity. Have you ever done a lucky dip?

Ss: Yes, yes.

T: Yes. Where you put your hand in and you take one thing out. I'll do it the first time. Put my hand in and I'll just bring . . . something out. [She pulls

- out a mirror.] Oh, a mirror. Now how can this help us improve our language – you got any ideas? Irene?
- S: We can help, er, our voc . . . vocabulary.
- T: Vocabulary's one thing, yes. How?
- S: We can look, er, how we pronounce the words. (Mmm) We can look in the mirror and see how our mouth moves.
- T: Good. Yes, we can see how our mouth moves – by looking at our reflection in the mirror. For example, the sound th. Can you all say th?
- Ss: No. [Laughter]

[The teacher distributes the rest of the objects in the bag and the students, working in groups, spend 10 minutes discussing the ways in which the different objects they have chosen can be used for practicing English outside the class. The teacher then calls the activity to a halt.]

(Nunan, 1991: 182)

### **The learning process domain**

I suggested earlier that one answer to the question of why learners do not learn what teachers teach is that they come into the classroom with different mind sets, different points of focus, or, as I put it above, different agendas. Turning from the experiential content to the learning process domain, I should like to suggest that a partial answer to the question can be found in a mismatch at the level of learning process. There is, in fact, evidence to support this notion.

Some years ago, I carried out a comparative study into the learning preferences of teachers and learners in the Australian Adult Migrant Education Service program (Nunan, 1987). When I compared the preferences of learners and teachers in relation to selected learning tasks and activities, I found some stark contrasts and dramatic mismatches. The results of this study are summarized in Table 5.2. The table shows that there are mismatches between teachers and learners on all but one of the items (students and teachers agreed that conversation practice was a very high priority). In all other cases, there were mismatches between the teaching preferences of the teachers and the learning preferences of the students. For example, students gave a low rating for pair work, whereas teachers gave this item a very high rating. The same was the case with student self-discovery of errors. Now, I am not suggesting that student views should be acceded to in all cases. However, I would argue that, at the very least, teachers

*Table 5.2* Teacher/student mismatches in the learning process domain

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
Explanation to class	Very high	High
Conversation practice	Very high	Very high
Error correction	Very high	Low
Vocabulary development	Very high	High
Using cassettes	Low	Medium high
Student self-discovery of errors	Low	Very high
Using pictures, film, video	Low	Low medium
Pair work	Low	Very high
Language games	Very low	Low

should find out what their students think and feel about what and how they want to learn.

Willing (1988) carried out a large scale study into the learning styles and learning strategy preferences of adult (17- to 78-year-old) immigrant learners of English as a second language in Australia. With 517 learners, Willing had a substantial database. Using a questionnaire and interview, Willing investigated possible learning style differences which could be attributed to a range of biographical variables such as learners' ethnic backgrounds, ages, levels of education, time in the target country, and speaking proficiency levels. The study yielded certain surprising findings. In the first instance, learners did have views on the learning process and were capable of articulating these. Perhaps the most surprising finding was that none of the biographical variables correlated significantly with any of the learning preferences:

None of the learning differences as related to personal variables were of a magnitude to permit a blanket generalization about the learning preferences of a particular biographical sub-group. Thus, any statement to the effect that 'Chinese are X' or 'South Americans prefer Y', or 'Younger learners like Z', or 'High-school graduates prefer Q' is certain to be inaccurate. The most important single finding of the study was that for any given learning issue, the typical spectrum of opinions on that issue were represented, in virtually the same ratios, within any biographical subgroup.

(Willing, 1988: 150–151)

What can be done about the gap between instruction and learning in the learning process domain? A similar process, I believe, to the one suggested in the experiential content domain. A continuum in the learning process domain, similar to that which has been proposed for the experiential content domain, can help lead learners in the direction of autonomy, and equip them with process skills for negotiating the curriculum. (See Table 5.3.)

The first step in the direction of the process is to encourage learners to identify the strategy implications of pedagogical tasks. Underlying this first step is the fact that everything we do in the classroom involves a learning strategy. This is so regardless of whether we are talking about communicative tasks such as role plays, selective listening, or debates, or more mechanical exercises such as pronunciation drills, vocabulary memorization, or cloze exercises. Again, I would stress that, although in certain contexts it may not be feasible to travel very far along the continuum, it is possible to take the first step with most learners in most contexts.

*Table 5.3* Learner-centeredness: levels of implementation in the learning process domain

<i>Level</i>	<i>Learner action</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
1	Awareness	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies.
2	Involvement	Learners make choices among a range of options.
3	Intervention	Learners modify/adapt tasks.
4	Creation	Learners create their own tasks.
5	Transcendence	Learners become teachers and researchers.



A reasonable first step, then, would be to raise learner awareness of the strategies underlying the particular task in question. This is something that all teachers can do, regardless of whether they are working with a mandated curriculum and materials, or whether are relatively free to decide what to teach and how to teach it. This is illustrated in the following classroom extract. The students are a high beginning-level group of young adult Japanese EFL learners.

*T:* One of the things, er, we practice in this course . . . is . . . or some of the things we practice are learning strategies. And one of the learning strategies that will help you learn new words is the learning strategy of classifying. Do you know what classifying means?

*Ss:* No, no.

*T:* Have you heard this word before?

*Ss:* No.

*T:* Classifying means putting things that are similar together in groups. OK? So if I said, er, I want all of the girls to go down to that corner of the room, and all the boys to go into this corner of the room, I would be classifying the class according to their sex or their gender. What I'd like you to do now in Task 5 is to classify some of the words from the list in Task 4. OK?

(In the preceding task, students had read a postcard and circled the words that describe people. They were then given a three column table with the headings: color, age, and size.)

The next step in the development of a learner-centered classroom would be to train learners to identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies. Detailed guidance on how this might be achieved is beginning to appear in the literature. Excellent starting points for those who are interested are provided by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Willing (1989). The following example was adapted from an L2 situation for use in a foreign language context. It has been used successfully with learners in many different pedagogical situations (see Figure 5.1).

At the next level, learners would be involved in making choices among a range of options. The notion that learners are capable of making choices has been questioned by some commentators. It has also been suggested that the notion of choice is a Western one, which is less familiar to the non-Western psyche. This has been contested by several researchers, who have data, rather than opinion, bias, or experience to draw on. Widdows and Voller (1991), for example, investigated the ability of Japanese university students to make choices regarding learning preferences. As a result of their study they found that students were able to make choices and that their preferences were often markedly at odds with the content and methodology that they were exposed to in classes. They report that:

Students do not like classes in which they sit passively, reading or translating. They do not like classes where the teacher controls everything. They do not like reading English literature much, even when they are literature majors. Thus it is clear that the great majority of university English classes are failing to satisfy learner needs in any way. Radical changes in the content of courses, and especially in the types of courses that are offered, and the systematic retraining of EFL teachers in learner-centred classroom pro-

## Task 1

Close your book. Your partner is going to find out your learning style. Answer your partner's questions.

## Task 2

a. Now find out your partner's learning style. If he/she agrees with the statement, put a check mark [✓] in the box.

## HOW DO YOU LIKE TO LEARN?

## Type 1:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| I like to learn by watching and listening to native speakers. | [ ] |
| I like to learn by talking to friends in English.             | [ ] |
| At home, I like to learn by watching DVDs/videos in English.  | [ ] |
| I like to learn by using English out of class.                | [ ] |
| I like to learn English words by hearing them.                | [ ] |
| In class, I like to learn by conversations.                   | [ ] |
| TOTAL:  | [ ] |

## Type 2:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| I like the teacher to explain everything to us. | [ ] |
| I want to write everything in my notebook.      | [ ] |
| I like to have my own textbook.                 | [ ] |
| In class, I like to learn by reading.           | [ ] |
| I like to study grammar.                        | [ ] |
| I like to learn English words by seeing them.   | [ ] |
| TOTAL:  | [ ] |

## Type 3:

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| In class, I like to learn by games.                                | [ ] |
| In class, I like to learn by looking at pictures, films and video. | [ ] |
| I like to learn English by talking in pairs.                       | [ ] |
| At home, I like to learn by using cassettes.                       | [ ] |
| In class, I like to listen to and use cassettes.                   | [ ] |
| I like to go out with the class and practice English.              | [ ] |
| TOTAL:   | [ ] |

## Type 4:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| I like to study grammar.                            | [ ] |
| At home, I like to learn by studying English books. | [ ] |
| I like to study English by myself (alone).          | [ ] |
| I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes.      | [ ] |
| I like the teacher to give us problems to work on.  | [ ] |
| At home, I like to learn by reading newspapers.     | [ ] |
| TOTAL:  | [ ] |

b. Now add up the number of check marks for each section, and put the number in the total box. The highest total shows what kind of learner your partner is.

Figure 5.1 Learning style questionnaire

cedures are steps that must be taken, if teachers and administrators are seriously interested in addressing their students' needs.

(Widdows and Voller, 1991)

In some foreign language contexts, the notion of student choice may be a relatively unfamiliar or even alien one. In such a case, it is preferable to engage the learners in a relatively modest level of decision making in the first instance. For example, if the data for a lesson include a reading passage and a listening text, learners might be asked to decide which they would rather do first, the reading or the listening. If teachers are uncomfortable with the idea of students doing different things at the same time, then it can be put to a class vote. They could then gradually be involved in making choices such as the following, in which the activity type and task are similar. The point is not that learners in different groups will be doing things that are radically different but that they are being sensitized to the notion of making choices.

You choose: Do A or B.

- A Group work. Think about the last time you went grocery shopping. Make a list of all the things you bought. Compare this list with the lists of three or four other students. Whose list is the healthiest?
- B Group work. Think about all the healthy things you did last week. Make a list. Compare this list with the lists of three or four other students. Who had the healthiest week?

Once learners are used to the idea, they can be invited to make more elaborate choices, as in the following example:

You choose.

Look quickly at the next three tasks and decide whether these are listening, speaking, reading, or writing tasks.

Now decide the order in which you wish to do them. Circle your choices.

	I'll do this task
Task 1: A ..... task	1st 2nd 3rd
Task 2: A ..... task	1st 2nd 3rd
Task 3: A ..... task	1st 2nd 3rd

These examples illustrate the point that, even within the various points on the learner-centered continuum, there is a wide range of possibilities.

Having encouraged learners to make choices, the next step on the continuum would be to provide them with opportunities to modify and adapt classroom tasks. This could be a preliminary step to teaching students to create their own tasks. This need not involve highly technical materials design skills, which would clearly be unrealistic. I have started learners on the path toward developing their own materials by giving them the text but not the questions in a reading comprehension task and asking them, in small groups, to write their own questions. These are then exchanged with another group to be answered and discussed.

At a more challenging level, learners would become teachers. There is nothing like the imminent prospect of having to teach something for stimulating

learning. Lest this should be thought utopian, I can point to precedents in the literature. Assinder (1991), for example, gave her students the opportunity of developing video-based materials which they subsequently used for teaching other students in the class. Her class was composed of nine high intermediate-level EFL students undertaking an intensive English course in Australia. The innovation was a success, the critical factor of which, according to Assinder, was the opportunity for the learner to become the teacher:

I believe that the goal of 'teaching each other' was a factor of paramount importance. Being asked to present something to another group gave a clear reason for the work, called for greater responsibility to one's own group, and led to increased motivation and greatly improved accuracy. The success of each group's presentation was measured by the response and feedback of the other group; thus there was a measure of in-built evaluation and a test of how much had been learned. Being an 'expert' on a topic noticeably increased self-esteem, and getting more confident week by week gave [the learners] a feeling of genuine progress.

(Assinder, 1991: 228)

The final level on the learning process continuum I would like to propose here is the notion of the learners becoming language researchers. Once again, for those who think this notion fanciful or utopian, there is a precedent in the literature. Heath (1992), working with black dialect speakers in an Alabama high school and a group of ESL students in south Texas, asked her collaborators to document the language they encountered in the community beyond the classroom.

Students were asked . . . to work together as a community of ethnographers, collecting, interpreting, and building a data bank of information about language in their worlds. They had access to knowledge I wanted, and the only way I could get that knowledge was for them to write to me. They collected field notes, wrote interpretations of patterns they discovered as they discussed their field notes, and they answered the questions I raised about their data collection and their interpretations.

(p. 42)

Despite the struggle involved, students learned through the process of becoming ethnographic researchers that communication is negotiation, and they got to reflect on the important relationships between socialization, language, and thought. In substantive terms, all students moved out of the basic English into regular English classes, and two moved into honors English. As Heath (1992) reports, 'Accomplishments were real and meaningful for these students' (p. 144).

There is a rapidly growing literature on learning strategies and learner strategy training which, I believe, supports the thrust of what I have had to say so far. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) provide a comprehensive review of the literature, as well as presenting typologies, models, and pedagogical strategies. Their work points to the generally positive effect of strategy training. Wenden and Rubin (1987) present a series of empirical investigations designed to illuminate two central questions: 'What do learners do to acquire second language

competence?’ and ‘What can be done to facilitate this process?’ (p. xvii). The studies show the diversity of learning skills and strategies which learners bring to the task of learning another language and also illustrate and illuminate the metalinguistic awareness of learners themselves of the processes underlying their own learning. In terms of classroom practice, the studies reinforce the ideas set out here. For example, Chamot (1987) reports that teachers can profitably encourage students to identify and record their own use of strategies, and then direct students to utilize strategies for a variety of activities. Less proficient students could be encouraged to employ the strategies used by more proficient students. Oxford’s (1990) book also draws on current research on learner strategies but focuses more directly on the practical pedagogical implications of this research for incorporating strategy training into language learning. She develops an exhaustive taxonomy of learning strategy types which are illustrated in detail in the book.

A great deal of early research focused on the issue of the good language learner (see, e.g., Rubin, 1975, 1981; Rubin and Thompson, 1982). Rubin, who pioneered this work, found that all learners do apply strategies and that certain of these strategies seemed to be consistently utilized by good language learners. The implication here is that, once strategies used by good language learners are identified, they can be taught to less effective language learners. The unanswered issue here, however, is whether strategy preferences can be changed or whether they are symptomatic of deeper styles that are fundamental to the cognitive and personality styles of the individual and therefore impervious to change.

From an intercultural perspective which sees behavior as being affected by context, conclusions on the effectiveness of learner strategy training reached in (largely) Western educational contexts should be treated with caution. At best they should be seen as interesting working hypotheses to be investigated rather than firm conclusions to be embraced.

Learners who have reached a point where they are able to define their own goals and create their own learning opportunities have, by definition, become autonomous. Concepts of self-direction and learner autonomy, which gained a certain degree of prominence during the 1970s (see, e.g., Holec, 1979; Riley, 1982), and then appeared to wane, are recapturing the interest of language educators and researchers. Evidence for this can be found in several recent publications (an excellent example is Gardner and Miller, 1994) as well as conference papers and presentations. In fact, in June 1994, an international conference entitled *Autonomy in Language Learning* was held in Hong Kong.

Autonomy, like the other central constructs dealt with in this paper, is not an all-or-nothing concept. The ability of individuals to take responsibility for their own affairs (in this case language learning) will be largely determined by the context in which the learning takes place. Contextual factors impinging upon learning will include the age and proficiency level of the students, previous and current educational experiences, the goals of the language program, and the attitude and training of the teacher. The cultural and context-bound nature of autonomy is highlighted in a project described by Roberts, Davies, and Jupp (1992). The aim of the project was to develop a more student-centered approach to language learning within a multiethnic workplace context. In evaluating the project, they point out that, because of cultural difference and language dif-

ficulties, 'some students found exercises in autonomous learning bewildering, irrelevant, and unfamiliar, given the strong tradition of learning through other methods which the majority had experienced' (p. 318). However, they also point to the benefits of the student-autonomy project. These included a greater appreciation of course objectives on the part of teachers and learners, greater student awareness of language, and a growing ability on the part of students to carry out needs analysis and self-assessment.

If the concept of autonomy is problematic in Western contexts, one might expect it to be even more so in non-Western ones. Several recent studies bear out this observation, although they also give cause for optimism to those who believe that encouraging some degree of learner autonomy is justified. Farmer (1994), for example, describes an independent learning program in Hong Kong. In this context, where learning is highly structured, learners are expected to, and themselves expect to, adopt a highly passive role. Indeed it might be said that formal education in this context teaches the need to be taught: learners are conditioned to believe that in order to learn one must be taught and that the teacher holds a monopoly over the transmission of knowledge (p. 14).

The program Farmer described attempted to incorporate elements from the local culture. For example, because the society is a group-oriented one, the learning program was group driven and group negotiated. An evaluation of the program showed that it had achieved a degree of success. Although a large majority of the students still wanted a teacher to be present at all times, a majority also gave positive evaluations of key aspects of the program including analysis of needs and self-selection of materials. One third of the students felt better equipped to work independently as a result of the program.

A question sometimes posed by foreign language teachers (and learners) is: Why should I teach/learn this language when the chance that I shall ever use it for genuine communication is an extremely distant prospect? I believe that one of answers to this question can be found in the ideas presented above. By sensitizing learners to the nature of the learning process, by helping them develop skills in cognitive operations such as classifying, brainstorming, inductive and deductive reasoning, by getting them to cooperate with each other, by giving them opportunities to make choices and to develop independent learning skills, we are fostering the cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intercultural knowledge, skills, and sensitivities which provide a rationale for a great many educational systems around the world. In fact, the knowledge, skills, and sensitivities referred to above are not peculiar to language learning, and could just as readily be taught through other subjects on the school curriculum. However, it is difficult to think of another subject more appropriate for developing such skills than a foreign language, particularly when one considers the ready-made advantage that a foreign language has for developing intercultural sensitivities and understandings.

In this section of the chapter, I have suggested that one way of narrowing the gap between teaching and learning is to incorporate into language programs opportunities for learners to reflect on and, where feasible, take charge of their own learning processes. I have argued that this involvement is not an all-or-nothing issue but that it can happen at any number of levels. The extent to which it is feasible for learners to become involved will depend on critical contextual variables such as the objectives of the language program, the age, stage, and previous learning experiences of the students, the attitude and training of

the teachers, and the philosophy of the institution within which the learning takes place. I have also illustrated through practical examples ways in which the ideas set out in the section can be operationalized in both second and foreign language contexts.

### **The language content domain**

The final domain which can affect the gap between teaching and learning is the language content domain. Although the positive effects of instruction are no longer in question, there is still a great deal of controversy and doubt over the relationship between instruction and learning (see, e.g., Ellis, 1991; Long, 1988; Pienemann, 1989). To deal adequately with the debate would necessitate an article in its own right. Given the centrality of the issues to the question under discussion, it needs to be dealt with however superficially. Although the following review is highly selective, it is representative of the kinds of research carried out in this area: These studies investigated the acquisition of grammar by children and adults in both second and foreign language contexts.

The name most closely associated with the debate on the relationship between learning and acquisition is Krashen (see, e.g., Krashen, 1982), who argued that there are two distinct mental processes operating in the development of an L2 language: conscious learning and subconscious acquisition. Krashen argued that instruction leads to conscious learning, not to subconscious acquisition, and that it is the latter that underlies the ability to communicate in a foreign language. A study by Ellis (1984) involving ESL children in Britain appeared to support Krashen's position. Ellis found that formal instruction appeared to have little effect on the acquisition of question forms. However, Swain (1985), in reviewing work carried out in Canada, argued that comprehensible input is a necessary but not sufficient condition for acquisition, that learners need opportunities to interact as well. Montgomery and Eisenstein's (1985) study appears to support this view, finding that learners who were given opportunities to interact in addition to receiving grammatical instruction developed greater fluency than those who received instruction only. This is not surprising. What is surprising is their finding that the grammar plus opportunities to interact group also outperformed the grammar only group on tests of grammatical knowledge. Similarly, Schmidt and Frota (1986), in a case study of the acquisition of Portuguese as a second language, found that instruction and opportunities to interact out of class were both necessary. They also argue the case for conscious learning, claiming that improvements occurred when the subject of the study 'noticed the gap' (pp. 310–311) between the language he was using and that of the native speakers with whom he was interacting.

Pienemann (1989), working with adult learners of German as a foreign language in Australia, proposed a series of developmental stages and argued that a target form would only appear in the productive repertoire of learners when they were developmentally ready to acquire that particular form. Pienemann's answer to the question of why learners do not learn what teachers teach is that teachers are often trying to teach the unteachable.

In her review of a considerable body of Canadian research into the relative merits of traditional and communicative classrooms, Spada (1990) concluded that classrooms that were basically communicative in orientation, but that contained opportunities for explicit grammar instruction, were superior to

traditional classrooms that focused heavily on grammar, as well as immersion programs that eschewed explicit grammatical instruction. A similar outcome was obtained by Doughty (1991), who investigated the acquisition of relativization by adult learners in Australia. She found that learners receiving instruction outperformed learners who received only exposure.

In an EFL context in Singapore, Lim (1992) found that the frequency and quality of learner participation related significantly to qualitative aspects of learner participation such as the range of speech acts and control of conversational management techniques. Furthermore, learner participation in class related significantly to improvements in language proficiency.

Fotos (1993), working with adult EFL students in Japan, found that small-group, problem-solving tasks are as effective as formal teacher-fronted instruction for grammatical consciousness raising. Her study places squarely on the agenda the issue of just what is meant by instruction.

In an adult EFL context in China, Wu (1994) found that declarative knowledge (i.e., the ability to identify errors and state rule violations) did not automatically lead to procedural knowledge (i.e., the ability to put known forms to communicative effect). What did facilitate this transference was the addition of opportunities to activate knowledge through output activities. Zhou (1991), also working in China, although with children rather than adults, found that formal instruction resulted in acquisition of some structures (passives) but not others (tense and aspect). Zhou also claims on the basis of the research that explicit (declarative) knowledge can be converted to implicit (procedural) knowledge through practice.

Finally, Mollering and Nunan (1995) investigated the acquisition of modal particles by adult learners of German as a foreign language in Australia. They found that instruction made a difference but, once again, only in certain areas. The studies reviewed in this section are summarized in Table 5.4.

What do we make of this rich array of outcomes? It seems to me that four critical variables appear and reappear in the research. These can be divided into factors external to the learner (e.g., the provision of instruction; the provision of opportunities for learners to use the target language), and factors which are learner-internal (e.g., the ability to describe the rules of the target language; the ability to put these rules to use in communication). The challenge for research is to tease out the complex interplay between these variables. The one thing that does seem to be beyond dispute in this selective review is that the instruments which have been thus far employed are relatively blunt. In relation to instruction, one would want to know what kind of instruction. Regarding interaction, one would want to know about the type of interaction, how it was arranged, and how the data were collected. Similarly with the learner-internal factors, we need to know which aspects of the lexicogrammar are being investigated and reported, how the data were collected, in what contexts, and under what conditions.

In practical terms, the studies summarized in this section suggest that there is value in teaching tasks which encourage learners to come to an inductive understanding of grammatical rules and principles through communicative small-group tasks and discussion. There is no room here to provide detailed examples of what these might look like, although the following examples should illustrate the procedure. Rutherford (1987) provides this example of a grammar consciousness-raising task:



Table 5.4 A selective review of investigations into the effects of instruction on acquisition

<i>Researcher</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Results</i>
Krashen	1982	Child ESL United States	Instruction does not lead to acquisition. Comprehensible input is necessary and sufficient for acquisition.
Ellis	1984	Child ESL Britain	Formal instruction on question forms has little effect on the acquisition of question forms.
Swain	1985	Child FFL Canada	Comprehensible input alone does not lead to acquisition.
Montgomery and Eisenstein	1985	Adult ESL United States	Grammar plus opportunities to communicate lead to greater improvements in fluency and grammatical accuracy than grammar only.
Schmidt and Frola	1986	Adult PSL Brazil	Instruction and opportunities to communicate out of class are both necessary. Improvement occurred when subject consciously 'noticed the gap'.
Pienemann	1989	Adult GFL Australia	Grammatical forms will only be acquired when instruction matches the learners' developmental stage.
Spada	1990	EFL/FFL Canada	Communicative classrooms with instruction plus opportunities for interaction are superior to traditional instruction and also to immersion programs.
Doughty	1991	Adult ESL Australia	Learners receiving instruction (both meaning and form focused) outperformed exposure only learners on knowledge of relativization.
Lim	1992	EFL Singapore	Frequency/quality of learner participation related significantly to qualitative aspects of learner participation, for example range of speech acts and control of conversational management techniques. Learner participation in class related significantly to improvements in language proficiency.
Fotos	1993	Adult EFL Japan	Small-group, problem-solving tasks are as effective as formal teacher-fronted instruction for grammatical consciousness raising.
Wu	1994	Adult EFL China	Declarative knowledge does not lead to procedural knowledge without opportunities to activate knowledge through output activities.
Zhou	1991	Child EFL China	Formal instruction resulted in acquisition of some structures (passives) but not others (tense and aspect). Explicit (declarative) knowledge can be converted to implicit (procedural) knowledge through practice.
Mollering and Nunan	1995	GFL Australia	Instruction made a difference in the acquisition of German modal particles, although acquisition is relativistic, complex, and organic.

A Which, if any, of these sentences contains an error? Find the errors and correct them.

- 1 In Lake Maracaibo was discovered the oil.
- 2 After a few minutes the guests arrived.
- 3 In my country does not appear to exist any constraints on women's rights.

(Rutherford, 1987: 161)

B Complete the sentences in normal English.

- 1 Many French Canadians find [They learn English] important.
- 2 Quebec makes [Quebec preserves its French-speaking identity] a rule.
- 3 Quebec takes [French is to be given priority over English] for granted.
- 4 The government left [Will French be the official language of Quebec?] up to the people to decide.

(Rutherford, 1987: 165–166)

Most grammar practice activities can be modified so that they provide learners with interactive opportunities for this sort of inductive grammar work, as the following example (one of four exercises on personal pronouns) illustrates:

Group work class survey. Ask your classmates questions like this: Do you go to the movies often? Write one name in each box in the chart. See how many boxes you can fill.

FIND SOMEONE WHO . . .	YES	NO
likes hamburgers		
plays tennis		
speaks three languages		
likes classical music		
goes to the movies often		
wants to be an actor		
lives alone		
likes modern art		
drives a car		
works at night		

Do you know the rule?

Fill in the blanks with the correct pronouns from this list: I, you, he, she, it, we, they.

Use do with ..... Use does with .....

(Nunan, 1994: 20)

As Fotos (1994) points out, the advantage of these tasks is that they can be employed both 'in communicative classrooms as substitutes for grammar lessons and in traditional, teacher-fronted classrooms as a method of studying grammar while providing essential opportunities for communicative use of the target language' (p. 327). They would seem to be particularly suited to those foreign language contexts in which learners have limited opportunities to interact in, and form hypotheses about, the target language.

## Discussion

I want to summarize the ground covered in this chapter by taking the relatively unusual step of proposing an hypothesis. It is a rather large hypothesis, with numerous subsections. I propose it, not as an hypothesis to be tested through a formal experiment, but as a series of statements which individual teachers can contest through the realities of their own classroom.

I should like to suggest that, all other things being equal, the gap between teaching and learning will be narrowed when learners are given a more active role in the three key domains of content, process, and language.

In the experiential content domain, when:

- instructional goals are made explicit to learners;
- learners are involved in selecting, modifying, or adapting goals and content;
- learners create their own goals and generate their own content;
- active links are created between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom.

In the learning process domain, when:

- learners are trained to identify the strategies underlying pedagogical tasks;
- learners are encouraged to identify their own preferred learning styles and to experiment with alternative styles;
- learners are given space to make choices and select alternative learning pathways;
- learners are given opportunities to modify, adapt, create, and evaluate pedagogical tasks and learning processes;
- learners are encouraged to become their own teachers and researchers.

In the language content domain, when:

- learners are given opportunities to explore the organic, nonlinear relationships between language forms and communicative functions or, in Halliday's (1985) terms, to explore the relationships between what language is and what it does;
- classroom learning opportunities are created which enable learners to draw on the external factors of instruction and interactional opportunities in order to articulate their understanding of how language works as well as putting language to communicative use in real or simulated contexts.

In such use, the three domains discussed in this article begin to converge.

## Conclusion

One of my favorite pieces of learner data was contributed by an informant in Johnston's (1987) seminal study of language acquisition among immigrants in Australia. In reflecting on his own knowledge of English, Genghis, a Turkish immigrant, mused:

Before I came here I was knowing all the English language tense(s) present tense . . . past tense . . . present perfect tense . . . perfect tense . . . future tense . . . future in the past . . . everything . . . I was knowing . . . I am knowing now . I just asked, er, one day the boss, I said to him 'Are you knowing this tense?' for example go. . . . How can you use this word? . . . past tense? present tense? the other tense? He just looked at me like that . . . he told me 'I don't know Genghis.' This is Australian people. I am Turkish people. I am knowing, he doesn't know. Can you explain this?

(Genghis, cited in Johnston, 1987: 5)

It is the delightful dissonance between Genghis's ability to articulate his understanding of how English works and his ability to put that understanding to work in using language for communication that partly explains the gap between teaching and learning. Although we have made progress in our understanding of language learning and teaching, I do not believe the point will ever be reached when we can say with the assurance of the normative scientist, 'Ah, yes, now know!' As long as our conceptions of language, learners, and the learning process continue to evolve, and the teaching/learning process is transformed through practice and research, so too will the problems and challenges confronting the profession. As the problems change, so too will the solutions. It is up to each of us, as professionals, neither to accept proposals uncritically, nor to reject them out of hand but to reflect upon them and to contest them against the reality of our own context and situation. In the final analysis, however, it is the learner who must remain at the center of the process, for, no matter how much energy and effort we expend, it is the learner who has to do the learning.

All of this notwithstanding, I believe that there are substantive steps we can take to narrow the gap between teachers and learners, between instruction and outcome, between the curriculum documents (which all too often sit on staff-room shelves gathering dust) and the language classroom where teachers and learners collaboratively engage in the co-construction of the learning process. Looking back, it may well be that following Allwright (personal communication, April 1994) the question ought to be not Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?, but Why don't teachers teach what learners learn?

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## CHAPTER 6

# FOCUS ON FORM IN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

One of the first, if not the first, single-authored, book-length treatments of task-based language teaching was my 1989 book *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. In the book, I stressed the importance of grammar and a focus on form in TBLT. Despite this, I was criticized at various times for advocating a 'grammar-free' pedagogy. Thus, when asked by the publisher to complete a substantially revised second edition of the book, I took the opportunity to make my position clear by devoting an entire chapter to the place of grammar within TBLT.

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### Introduction and overview

The purpose of this chapter is to take a more detailed look at the place of grammar instruction within task-based language teaching. The issue of whether or not a focus on form has a place in task-based language teaching is controversial. In the first section of the chapter, I will review several theoretical and empirical aspects of form-focused instruction that are of significance to TBLT. I will then expand on two of these: form-focused versus unfocused tasks, and consciousness-raising. The section that follows then focuses on an issue of central importance to syllabus designers and materials writers: the question of where form-focused work should come in any task-based instructional cycle.

### Theoretical and empirical issues

As I have indicated, the place of a focus on form in TBLT is controversial. Some theorists adopt a 'strong' interpretation, arguing that communicative interaction in the language is necessary and sufficient for language acquisition, and that a focus on form is unnecessary. Krashen (1981, 1982) is one of the main proponents of this 'strong' approach. He argues that there are two processes operating in language development, subconscious acquisition and conscious learning, and that form-focused instruction is aimed at conscious learning which does not feed in to subconscious acquisition.

Another major issue for TBLT concerns the relationship between the task and the language that supports it, or through which it is realized. Here the question is whether a particular grammatical structure is required in order for a task to be completed successfully, or whether it is possible to complete a task successfully using whatever linguistic tasks are at one's disposal. Proponents of a 'strong' interpretation of TBLT believe very firmly in the latter view, that learners should be able to use whatever linguistic means they can muster, and that an approach which imposes linguistic constraints cannot be called 'task based'. As this is such an important issue it is taken up in detail in the section on focused and unfocused tasks.

A relatively new approach to the study of language acquisition in instructional contexts is 'sociocultural theory' (Lantolf, 2000). This approach has challenged the prevailing psycholinguistic tradition, which has dominated research into the place of a focus on form in the language classroom. It is based on the theories of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, who viewed language as a social as well as a cognitive tool through which humans are able to act upon and change the world in which they live. Researchers using this approach study the interactions between two or more language learners as they complete a task to see how their collaborative interactions provide opportunities for second language learning. This typically occurs when one of the participants has a piece of linguistic knowledge that the other does not, or when the learners collaboratively co-construct a piece of knowledge inductively. The ultimate aim of researchers working in this area is to demonstrate how collaborative conversations provide opportunities for second language learning.

### Focused versus unfocused tasks

A key issue for TBLT is whether the tasks themselves should be focused or unfocused. A focused task is one in which a particular structure is required in order for a task to be completed. An unfocused task is one in which the learners are able to use any linguistic resources at their disposal in order to complete the task.

Consider the following discussion task that occurs in a unit of work on the topic of 'Inventions'.

What are the five most helpful inventions and the five most annoying inventions?  
Make a list. Then explain your opinion.

[Illustrations of alarm clock, light bulb, microwave oven, braces]

Helpful inventions

Example: telephone

1

2

3

4

5

Annoying inventions

Example: alarm clock

1

2

3

4

5

(Source: Nunan, 2005)



It might reasonably be predicted that learners would need to use the superlatives 'most helpful' and 'most annoying', as well as clauses of reason with 'because', coming up with statements such as 'I think the most helpful invention is the light bulb, because it gives people more time to work and play every day.' However, there are numerous other ways in which the task might be completed without the use of these particular forms. ('I hate alarm clocks. They drive me nuts. I go to bed late and I like to sleep in.') In fact, the number of tasks in which it is possible to predict, with a high degree of certainty, the exact grammatical structures the learners will use is relatively small.

In discussing the issue of whether a task can or should predetermine a particular grammatical form, Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) make a number of useful comments. They point out that, while a particular form may not be essential for the successful completion of a task, certain forms (such as the ones in the task above) could be expected to arise quite naturally in the course of the task. They also point out that, while linguistic forms targeted by the curriculum, the textbook or the teacher might not be essential, the use of such forms will greatly facilitate the completion of the task.

Willis and Willis (2001: 173–174) reject the notion of 'focused' (or, as they call them, 'metacommunicative') tasks:

The use of the word 'task' is sometimes extended to include 'metacommunicative tasks', or exercises with a focus on linguistic form, in which learners manipulate language or formulate generalizations about form. But a definition of task which includes an explicit focus on form seems to be so all-embracing as to cover almost anything that might happen in a classroom. We therefore restrict our use of the term task to communicative tasks and exclude metacommunicative tasks from our definition. One feature of TBL, therefore, is that learners carrying out a task are free to use any language they can to achieve the outcomes: language forms are not prescribed in advance.

However, this does not mean that an instructional sequence should not include form-focused exercise – merely that they should not be called tasks.

## **Consciousness-raising tasks**

Ellis (2001) argues for a particular variant of focused tasks that he calls consciousness-raising (CR) tasks. Consciousness-raising tasks are designed to draw learners' attention to a particular linguistic feature through a range of inductive and deductive procedure. The assumption here is not that a feature once raised to consciousness will be immediately incorporated into the learner's interlanguage, but that it is a first step in that direction.

Ellis states that consciousness-raising tasks differ from other focused tasks in two essential ways.

First, whereas structure-based production tasks, enriched input tasks and interpretation tasks are intended to cater primarily to implicit learning, CR tasks are designed to cater primarily to explicit learning – that is, they are intended to develop awareness at the level of 'understanding' rather than awareness at the level of 'noticing' (see Schmidt 1994). Thus, the desired

outcome of a CR task is awareness of how some linguistic feature works. Second, whereas the previous types of task were built around content of a general nature (e.g. stories, pictures of objects, opinions about the kind of person you like), CR tasks make language itself the content. In this respect, it can be asked whether CR tasks are indeed tasks. They are in the sense that learners are required to talk meaningfully about a language point using their own linguistic resources. That is, although there is some linguistic feature that is the focus of the task learners are not required to use this feature, only think about it and discuss it. The 'taskness' of a CR task lies not in the linguistic point that is the focus of the task but rather in the talk learners must engage in order to achieve an outcome to the task.

(Ellis, 2001: 162–163)

In designing CR tasks, the first step is to isolate a specific feature for attention. The learners are provided with input data illustrating the feature, and may also be given a rule to explain the feature. They are then required to either understand or (if they have not been given the rule) to describe the grammatical structure in question.

The following example of a CR task is provided by Fotos and Ellis (1991).

- A What is the difference between verbs like 'give' and 'explain'?

She gave a book to her father (= grammatical)

She gave her father a book (= grammatical)

The policeman explained the law to Mary (= grammatical)

The policeman explained Mary the law (= ungrammatical)

- B Indicate whether the following sentences are grammatical or ungrammatical.

They saved Mark a seat.

His father read Kim a story.

She donated the hospital some money.

They suggested Mary a trip on the river.

They reported the police the accident.

They threw Mary a party.

The bank lent Mr Thatcher some money.

He indicated Mary the right turning.

The festival generated the college a lot of money.

He cooked his girlfriend a cake.

- C Work out a rule for verbs like 'give' and 'explain'.

List the verbs in B that are like 'give' (i.e. permit both sentence patterns) and those that are like 'explain' (i.e. allow only one sentence pattern).

What is the difference between the verbs in your two lists?

This example is interesting because the grammatical structure does not appear in any standard grammar reference books. Despite this, advanced learners of English are able to identify several 'rules' or principles (Ellis, personal communication). One of these is that the verbs permitting both patterns are from Old English, whereas the others are from Greek or Latin. Number of syllables is also a factor.

## **The place of a focus on form in an instructional sequence**

For those who accept the value in having a focus on form at some point in the instructional cycle, there is an ongoing question as to where such a focus should come in the cycle. In early versions of task-based language teaching, the tendency was to introduce the focus on form first, at what was called the 'pre-communicative stage' of a lesson or unit of work. This was intended to provide a basis for later communicative work, the argument being that it was unrealistic to expect learners to be able to use language that they had not been explicitly taught. In practice, this approach was very little different from the 3Ps (presentation, practice, production) instructional cycle that it was designed to replace.

Elsewhere (Nunan, 2004), I presented a six step pedagogical sequence which shows where I believe that a focus on form should come, that is, at step four in the sequence. There are several reasons for placing it here, rather than at the beginning of the sequence. Firstly, the sequence begins with a focus on the communicative ends rather than the linguistic means. In the steps prior to this, learners get to see, hear and use the target language from a communicative or pseudo-communicative perspective. They get to see and hear the language being used communicatively by native speakers or competent second language speakers. Hopefully, this will make it easier for the learners to establish links between the linguistic forms and the communicative functions.

Consider the following task and exercise types from the Interchange series. Which types provide an opportunity for a focus on form? How would you sequence these types into an instructional sequence? What is the rationale for your sequencing?

*Table 6.1*

<i>Task/exercise type</i>	<i>Description</i>
Snapshot	The snapshots graphically present interesting real-world information that introduces the topic of a unit or cycle, and also develop vocabulary. Follow-up questions encourage discussion of the Snapshot material and personalize the topic.
Conversation	The Conversations introduce the new grammar of each cycle in a communicative context and present functional and conversational expressions.
Grammar focus	The new grammar of each unit is presented in colour boxes and is followed by controlled and freer communicative practice activities. These freer activities often have students use the grammar in a personal context.

Fluency exercise	These pair, group, whole class or role-play activities provide more personal practice of the new teaching points and increase the opportunity for individual student practice.
Pronunciation	These exercises focus on important features of spoken English, including stress, rhythm, intonation, reductions and blending.
Listening	The Listening activities develop a wide variety of listening skills, including listening for gist, listening for details, and inferring meaning from context. Charts or graphics often accompany these task-based exercises to lend support to students.
Word Power	The Word Power activities develop students' vocabulary through a variety of interesting tasks, such as word maps and collocation exercises. Word Power activities are usually followed by oral and written practice that helps students understand how to use the vocabulary in context.
Writing	The Writing exercises include practical writing tasks that extend and reinforce the teaching points in the unit and help develop students' compositional skills. The Teacher's Edition demonstrates how to use the models and exercises to focus on the process of writing.
Reading	The reading passages use various types of texts adapted from authentic sources. The readings develop a variety of reading skills, including reading for details, skimming, scanning, and making inferences. Also included are pre-reading, and post-reading questions that use the topic of the reading as a springboard to discussion.
Interchange Activities	The Interchange Activities are pair work, group work or whole class activities involving information sharing and role playing to encourage real communication. These exercises are a central part of the course and allow students to extend and personalize what they have practised and learned in each unit.

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Source: Adapted from Richards, Hull and Proctor (1997: iv–v).

## **Focus on form in the communicative classroom**

In this section, I would like to demonstrate some of the ways in which a focus on form can be integrated into task work in the classroom. In the lesson extract that follows, the students are completing an information gap task. The pedagogical objectives are asking about likes and dislikes using 'Wh-questions with "do" as well as "like" "like + Ving"'. The task illustrates the principle that tasks should show the relationship between form and function. In the teaching sequence, the grammar is presented within a context that makes clear to the learners one communicative use for the structure. It also illustrates the way that both declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge can be worked in to a pedagogical sequence.

- T: Right, now are you ready to do the info gap task? Yes? We've done lots of these, now, haven't we?
- Ss: (nod)
- T: The purpose of this task is to give you more practice in the language we're learning in this unit. What *are* we practising? Remember? Johnny?
- S: Talk about what people like.
- T: Talking about what people like – good. And?
- S: Talking about gift giving.

- T: Talking about gift giving. Right. These are our communication goals. And what structures do we use to do these things? . . . Anyone? . . . Yes, Mary?
- S: *What do you like?* And *What do you like doing?*
- T: Great! And we use *like* to talk about things, right? And *like doing* to talk about activities. What about making gift giving suggestions?
- S: *Let's.*
- T: OK, good, *Let's get him a CD*, or *Let's get Tom a golf club*. OK, now *when* do we give people gifts? *When?* Yes, Monica?
- S: Birthday.
- T: Birthdays are good. (Writes *birthdays* on the board.) Johnny?
- S: New . . . new baby.
- T: That's a good suggestion. (Writes *new baby* on the board and continues eliciting until there are a number of events on the board.) OK, now get into your pairs and I want Student A to look at page 107, and Student B to look at page 108. . . . (Peers over students' shoulder.) Johnny, you're the B student, aren't you? You're looking at the wrong page – 108, please. Good. Now, Bill likes the things the A students can see in the picture, but he already has these things. OK? Understand, Monica? Right. So, tell your partner what Bill likes, and your partner will suggest gifts. Write the suggestion in the space, and then decide on the best idea. Oh, Student A – start off by suggesting a reason for buying a gift – look at the board – it's his birthday, he's going away and so on. Right, off you go.  
(The students complete the task. As they do so, the teacher circulates and monitors. When she hears a mistake, she writes it in a notebook, but doesn't interrupt the students.)  
OK, I think everybody's finished now. Are you two finished? Right, good. So, now I want you to do the same thing for Connie. B, tell A what Connie likes. A will make suggestions. Write them down; then decide, decide on the best one, OK?  
(Again, the teacher circulates and monitors. At one point she is stopped by one pair, listens to their question and says 'It's called a subscription – a subscription.')
- OK, time's up. Let's hear what each pair decided. (Teacher elicits responses from the students and writes them on the board.) Well, that's great – look at all these interesting gifts. Which of these gifts would *you* like to receive, Johnny? . . . Sorry?
- S: The California Fitness Subscription.
- T: Yeah, I like that one too. How about you, Sophie? (She continues, eliciting students' preferences, and writing their names next to the gift.) OK. Now, you all did very well, but I noticed a few mistakes creeping in here and there. Look. (She writes the mistakes from her notebook on the board, and gets students to self-correct.)

I like this piece of classroom interaction for a number of reasons. In the first place, it demonstrates an effective teacher in action. At the beginning of the sequence, the teacher sets out the pedagogical agenda for the students. While the overall focus of the sequence is on the communicative task, she skilfully links the communicative goal of the lesson with the grammatical exponents that will assist the students as they complete the task. In addition, she demonstrates excellent elicitation skills, drawing information from the students rather than simply

Table 6.2

	How certain are you?		
	Less than 50% certain (it's possible)	90% certain (it's probable)	100% certain (it's certain)
Name			
Sex			
Age			
Marital status			
Occupation			
Habits			

telling them. As the students complete the task, she actively monitors them, providing models when necessary, and helps one pair out when they encounter a difficulty. In the post-task debriefing, she personalizes the task, and provides form-focused feedback on errors she noted as the students completed the task.

Samuda (2001) suggests that, in setting up a task, the teacher can provide either an implicit or an explicit focus on target language structures. She exemplifies these two teaching strategies in relation to a task designed to elicit the expressions of probability and possibility. Students working in small groups were provided with a set of objects that were supposedly the contents of a person's pocket. They had to speculate on the identity of the person, come to a conclusion, and justify that conclusion. In doing the task, each group had to fill in the following table, registering the degree of probability/possibility in relation to each possibility.

As you read the following classroom extracts, consider the role that the teacher is playing.

### Extract 1

S1: Habits?

Y: Well, first he smokes.

C: But we think uh 50% we think just 50%.

N: Yes, just maybe. We're not sure.

T: Oh yeah? Only 50%. Why's that?

S2: Yes, give proof.

N: Because here (showing matchbox). A matchbox.

T: Hmm, but you're *not certain* if he smokes, huh? (looking at matchbox)

A: Look (opens matchbox). Many matches, so maybe he just keep for friend, not for him. (laughter)

T: Hmm, I guess *it's possible* he might smoke. It's hard to tell just from this.

A: Yeah, not sure.

S2: You have more proof?

(Samuda, 2001: 129)

Here, the teacher is playing the role of group participant. In the course of the interaction, she also provides models of the target language. However, she does not draw attention to the language. Rather it remains implicit.

**Extract 2**

- T: So, lots of interesting ideas here. Paula, letters, schedule, opera, a busy man.  
 C: Japanese classes.  
 T: Yeah, right, I forgot he's learning Japanese too (laughter).  
 N: And golf.  
 T: Oh, yes very busy (laughter). Hmmm let's – why don't we look at how the language works here. Just for a minute uhh (looking at objects). Let's see now. Did you have anything here that you thought was probably? Like 90%?  
 Y: Businessman.  
 T: Businessman? 90%. OK, so you're 90% certain he's a businessman, right? Here's another way to say this. You think it's 90% certain, so you think he must be a businessman. He must be a businessman (writes it on board). So this (points to *must be* on board) is showing how *certain* how *sure* you are. Not 100%, but almost 100%. 90%.  
 A: So 100% is 'be' or 'must'?  
 T: 100? 100%? Then you can say he *is* a businessman (writes on board). When you when you're *not* 100% certain you can use must OK? Not he is a businessman but he must be a businessman. So 'be' here (pointing to 'must be' on board) is from this verb (pointing to *is*). Let's uh what other things do you have for probably?  
 C: Travel a lot.  
 T: OK, so if it's 90% you can say he must travel a lot (writes on board) so we use uh we use must with the verb (pointing).

(Samuda, 2001: 131)

In this second extract, the teacher adopts a much more overtly instructional role, focusing students explicitly on the form–meaning relationships in question. It may well be that it is this explicit focus which leads A to seek clarification ('So 100% is "be" or "must"?') two-thirds of the way through the extract.

Samuda's study highlights the complementary relationship between the task and the teacher:

. . . an important role for the task may be to attract initial attention to designated areas of meaning, and through task operations, create a need to mean; an important role for the teacher may be to complement the task by guiding attention towards form–meaning relationships. In particular, it has suggested that task input data may play a significant, although hitherto overlooked, role as a resource to be 'mined' by learners and teachers in different ways and for different purposes during task performance.

(Samuda, 2001: 137)

In the rest of this section, I have reproduced a classroom observation task adapted from Wajnryb (1992: 85–87) which is designed to encourage a focus on the place of grammar in a language lesson.

*Before the lesson*

Arrange to observe a lesson in which grammar will have some place. If possible, speak to the teacher in advance of the lesson, and discuss the lesson's aims in terms of its grammatical focus.

*During the lesson*

Keep an ethnographic record of the lesson. This means that you note down chronologically the main events in the lesson and their impact. This will have to be brief and synoptic enough for you to keep records 'in real time'. It does not have to include scripted actual language but rather a report of what was said and done. For example:

T enters . . . greets whole class from the front of room. T announces what the lesson is going to be about today. T reminds SS how this lesson follows on from yesterday's. . . . T drills new pattern . . . S asks question about the form of the verb in pattern on board . . . T explains. S seems to be satisfied but another S continues to ask similar questions.

*After the lesson*

For the purposes of the following questions, you should bear in mind your memory of the lesson and the specific contexts in which the events occurred as well as your written narrative record of the lesson.

- 1 To what extent was an aspect of grammar the central focus of the lesson you observed?
- 2 Were the students consciously involved in thinking about grammar? Was a rule or rules presented to them or were they expected to work the rules out for themselves? Were they helped or taught how to do this?
- 3 Describe the lesson in terms of 'knowing' or 'doing': were the students finding out how the language works or were they doing something with the language? Or both? And to what degrees?
- 4 If the students were at any time involved in doing something with the language, to what extent did the tasks or activities require them to make connections or inferences about the system of language?
- 5 Was there any evidence of a range of learning styles among the students in terms of how they reacted to a lesson involving grammar? Did these learning styles contrast with the teaching style in any way?
- 6 Have you any comments on the language used by the teacher to talk about language and how this facilitated access to understanding of the language?
- 7 Consider now any discussion about language that took place in the classroom, either among students, or involving the teacher. From the discussion, was there any evidence of learners trying to align new information with old – that is, processing recent input with their existing hypotheses about language?
- 8 Is it possible to summarize:  
what the students might have thought the lesson's objective was?  
what they came away with from the lesson?

Now contrast the lesson's objectives and its process.

Do you consider that it is important that students know what the lesson is going to be about and what objectives are set? Is it important that they come away from the lesson with what the teacher plans for them to come away with?



- 9 Considering the lesson you observed and the discussions you have had, what inferences can you draw from the lesson about (a) what language is, and (b) what language learning is to the teacher concerned? In other words, what theories (perhaps subconscious) underline the teacher's methodology? You may wish to pursue this in a discussion with the teacher.
- 10 In the debate about the place of grammar in teaching, one attempt to classify teaching according to the role of grammar is that proposed by Gibbons (1989) in his description of focused versus unfocused instructional cycles. Focused instructional cycles have a particular language item focus, such as a point of grammar, whereas unfocused instructional cycles are more likely to be skills or activity based. You may wish to map this lesson that you have observed on to Gibbons's schemata in order to deepen your understanding of how grammar features.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the place of a focus on form in TBLT. In this chapter, I have embraced a 'weak' interpretation of TBLT, arguing that, while focus on form activities do not constitute tasks in their own right, they do have a place in any task-based instructional cycle. The chapter reviewed some of the theoretical and empirical work introduced in Chapter 3 [of *Task-Based Language Teaching*] before looking in detail at the issue of focused/unfocused tasks and consciousness-raising. It then explored the place of a focus on form in the instructional cycle.

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## CHAPTER 7

# TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

An invitation to contribute to the 3rd edition of *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* provided me with an opportunity to present an updated account of my thinking on TBLT almost a quarter of a century after the publication of *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*.

Forthcoming in M. Celce-Murcia, D. Brinton and M.A. Snow (eds.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 3rd edition, Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle, forthcoming.

### Key questions

What is task-based language teaching (TBLT)?

Where did TBLT ‘come from’? That is, what are the conceptual and empirical wellsprings from which it evolved, and how does ‘task’ relate to broader educational considerations?

How is TBLT realized in terms of materials development and classroom action?

### Vignette

#### Context

After graduating from Seoul National University, Sunyoung Kang worked in a local high school for five years before spending two years in Sydney, Australia, completing a Master’s degree in TESOL, and teaching both Korean and English part time. On returning to Seoul, she took a position as a teacher at a private language institute. She has worked there for three years.

The class she is teaching consists of seven men and five women, all of whom are young professionals, working in fields such as banking, travel and technology. Although the class is oriented towards business, Sunyoung also likes to bring in aspects of social English. Because the students are all in full-time

employment, the class takes place in the evening and, as they are generally tired after a long day in the office, Sunyoung organizes lots of communicative group tasks that give the students opportunities to improve their spoken English through using it.

### **The task**

In the following vignette, the students are practicing the function of 'making arrangements to meet'. Sunyoung sets the scene by reminding the class of the objectives of the unit they have been working on. (The last class was based on several short conversations in which the people were making arrangements to meet.) She then divides the class into two. One group receives the 'Student A' worksheet (see below), while the other group receives the 'Student B' worksheet.

*Sunyoung:* So, tonight we're going to do an information gap task. You all know what an information gap task is – we did one last week, remember? You're going to work in pairs, and you have the same task to do but you have different . . . what? Different . . .?

*Eunha:* Informations.

*Sunyoung:* Right. Good, Eunha, different information. And you have to share your information. You have to share it. OK? So, before we do that, I want you to look at your worksheet. I want to make sure you understand the words. Work together in your groups and look at the activities on the worksheet. This is what people are doing on the weekend, on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, OK? Now, which activities are related to work and which are not? Discuss among yourselves and decide. Some are work activities and some are personal activities. If you don't know some words, you can ask me. I'll give you five minutes to make sure you know the words.

While the students are checking the words, she shuttles back and forth between the groups. When she is sure that the students understand the words, she claps her hands.

OK, now, it's time to get into pairs. So I want one person from Group A to pair up with one person from Group B. But don't show each other your worksheet – don't share your worksheets. This is an info gap task. You have to share your information – not show it.

The students rearrange their chairs so that they are sitting in pairs.

*Sunyoung:* Right, so – ready? S.K., ready? Good. So this is what you have to do. Take a look at your worksheets. What are the names of your friends on the worksheets? Their names.

*S.K.:* Bob, Karen, Philip and, er, Joan.

*Sunyoung:* Bob, Karen, Philip and Joan. So, on the worksheets, you can see some of the things they have to do this weekend. Some of the things that they have to do are related to work and some are not. You and your partner want to go to the movies sometime over the weekend with your friends. Understand? Good – off you go.

## Student A worksheet

	<i>Friday evening</i>	<i>Saturday afternoon</i>	<i>Saturday evening</i>	<i>Sunday afternoon</i>	<i>Sunday evening</i>
Bob	Work late	_____	Meet boss at airport	_____	Prepare for a meeting
Karen	_____	Free	_____	Go shopping	_____
Philip	Free	_____	Free	_____	Free
Joan	_____	Take car to garage	_____	Bake cookies	_____

## Student B worksheet

	<i>Friday evening</i>	<i>Saturday afternoon</i>	<i>Saturday evening</i>	<i>Sunday afternoon</i>	<i>Sunday evening</i>
Bob	_____	Go to meeting	_____	Free	_____
Karen	Clean apartment	_____	Visit aunt in hospital	_____	Free
Philip	_____	Play tennis	_____	Study for exam	_____
Joan	Free	_____	Go to concert	_____	Free

As the students complete the task, the teacher circulates between the pairs, and ensures that they are completing the task correctly. When all pairs have finished, she claps her hands together, points to one of the pairs and says:

*Sunyoung:* So, Eunha and Kelly. Did you manage to find a time slot when everyone is free?

*Eunha:* No, no slot, free slot.

*Sunyoung:* No free slot?

*Eunha:* No free slot.

*Sunyoung:* So what did you do? Decide not to go to the movies?

*Kelly:* We decide Sunday evening.

*Sunyoung:* Sunday evening. Why Sunday evening?

*Kelly:* Because only one person isn't free.

*Sunyoung:* Which one?

*Kelly:* Bob.

*Eunha:* Yes. Bob.

*Sunyoung:* So, poor Bob misses out! (laughs)

*Eunha:* Yes. Bob have to miss out.

*Sunyoung:* Do the rest of you agree?

*Students:* Yes, yes.

*Sunyoung:* OK. So, now I want you to change one thing about each person's schedule, just one thing, all right? Then I want you to change partners – find a new partner and do the task again.

## **What is TBLT?**

The overall purpose of this chapter is to provide a state-of-the-art overview of task-based language teaching. TBLT has its origin in a number of philosophical positions and empirical traditions in education, applied linguistics, and psychology. These include experiential learning and humanistic education, learner-centered instruction, and processes-oriented and analytical approaches to syllabus design.

In this section, I want to build on the vignette, above, to describe and illustrate some key principles of TBLT, firstly showing how it fits into a larger, historical curriculum framework, and secondly offering a definition of the concept. I will then, in the section that follows, look at its philosophical and empirical bases.

The vignette you just read is an extract from a lesson based on principles of TBLT. What do you notice about the extract? In the first instance, the learners are engaged in exchanging meanings, not memorizing and repeating utterances presented by the teacher or the textbook. In fact, the language they need in order to complete the task was practiced in a previous lesson. The learners exchange meanings based on the worksheet they have been given, not regurgitating someone else's meaning. While the task is a pedagogical one (you would not see two people doing a task like this outside of the classroom), there are clear connections between the in-class task and the real-world task of making plans and arrangements. Finally, assessing the success of the task is in terms of a communicative goal (negotiating and coming to an agreement about the best time to meet friends), not in terms of successfully manipulating linguistic forms. (For a discussion of these features, see Skehan, 1998.)

Any approach to pedagogy needs to take account of a number of broader curricular considerations before the actual process of designing courses and materials can begin. TBLT is no exception. Before turning directly to TBLT, I will provide an overview of these curriculum issues.

The term 'curriculum' is a broad one, encompassing all of the planned learning experiences provided by an institution or a course of study. The 'father' of modern curriculum study is Ralph Tyler (1949), who presented his 'Rational Curriculum Model' over 60 years ago. Since then, educators have staked out the curriculum terrain in different ways. Most, however, follow Tyler's argument that the curriculum needs to specify four essential elements: aim and objectives, content, learning experiences, and learning outcomes.

Underlying Tyler's model were four key questions:

- 1 What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
- 2 What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
- 3 How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
- 4 How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

These equate to syllabus design, methodology, and assessment/evaluation.

*Syllabus design* is concerned with specifying content and articulating this content in terms of goals and objectives.

*Methodology* identifies, organizes and sequences learning experiences.

*Assessment* and *evaluation* set out the means for determining whether the goals and objectives have actually been achieved.

These three slices of the curriculum 'pie' appear in some shape or form in most curricular proposals. However, they are sliced in different ways and have different degrees of prominence. In TBLT, for example, it is difficult to draw a strict separation between syllabus design and methodology, and the methodology slice is larger than in more traditional approaches which give greater prominence to content.

Tyler's model, along with other similar models, represents a static 'product-oriented' approach to curriculum design. At the end of the day, the designer has a set of 'products': lists of content, a set of goals and objectives, an inventory of task and activity types, assessment and evaluation instruments and so on.

In the mid-1970s, an alternative 'process' approach to curriculum study was proposed by the British educator Lawrence Stenhouse (1975). Rather than emphasizing curriculum products, Stenhouse argued that the curriculum should articulate processes and procedures for selecting content, learning experiences and evaluation instruments. He argued that the curriculum should be formulated in such a way as to make it accessible to critical scrutiny. Ideological positions should be made transparent. Teachers should have a greater say in curriculum design and development. The argument for transparency and a greater say for teachers reflect Stenhouse's 'democratic' rather than 'elitist' approach to education. His approach takes a dynamic view of curriculum. The curriculum is a living entity which continues to change and evolve during the course of the instructional process, a notion that resonated strongly with my own views on curriculum.

To my mind, the development of content and objectives, learning experiences, and assessment and evaluation instruments is the beginning not the end of the curriculum development process. This work, which is carried out before the instructional process begins, represents the curriculum as plan and results in syllabuses, textbooks, tests and so on. A second dimension is the curriculum in action as the curriculum is enacted in the moment-by-moment realities of the classroom. Finally, there is the curriculum as outcome, that is, what students actually learn as a result of instruction. We now know from classroom-based research and second language acquisition research that the relationships between planning, implementation and outcomes are complex and asymmetrical. In other words, the traditional view that planning equals teaching, and that teaching equals learning is simplistic and naïve.

Process-oriented views of curriculum resonated strongly with the emergence of communicative language teaching (CLT). Interestingly, this approach developed in applied linguistics at about the same time as Stenhouse's work was beginning to influence thinking and practice in general education. Language came to be seen, not so much as a set of static products to be memorized, but as a fluid set of procedures to enable human communication to take place. It was out of these shifting perspectives on curriculum and communication that TBLT was born.

Before turning directly to TBLT, I would like to touch on the relationship between CLT and TBLT. CLT is a broad, philosophical approach to language pedagogy. It draws on research in linguistics, anthropology, psychology and sociology and rests on a view of language as a tool for communication rather than as a body of content to be mastered. Task-based language teaching is a realization of this philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex relationship, I would say that CLT addresses the question *why?* TBLT answers the question *how?*

### **'Task' defined**

It is now time to look more directly at what we mean when we talk of tasks. TBLT belongs to a family of approaches to language pedagogy that are based on what is known as an 'analytical' approach to language pedagogy (Wilkins, 1976). I will describe this approach and contrast it with the 'synthetic' approach in the next section of this chapter. Before I look at the conceptual and empirical bases of TBLT, however, I need to clarify what I mean when I talk about 'tasks'.

Tasks have been defined in various ways. As I mentioned, when discussing the vignette which frames this chapter, I draw a basic distinction between pedagogical tasks, which are things that learners do in the classroom to acquire language, and real-world or target tasks, which are the uses to which individuals put language to do things in the world outside of the classroom. In an early, and rather programmatic, definition, Long (1985: 89) characterized real-world tasks as 'the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between'. He provides a long list of these things, including domestic chores such as painting a fence, dressing a child and writing a check, and workplace tasks such as weighing a patient, typing a letter and sorting correspondence.

Pedagogical tasks, on the other hand, describe what learners do in the classroom in order to activate and develop their language skills. Creating an inventory of real-world tasks, that is, listing the things that learners will actually or potentially need to perform outside the classroom, is a first step in the development of a TBLT curriculum. The next step is to turn these into pedagogical tasks. Such tasks involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language in order to achieve a non-linguistic outcome. In Sunyoung's classroom vignette, the learners had to exchange and negotiate information in order to find the most suitable time to go to the movies with their friends. In the vignette, the learners, working in pairs, have access to related, but different, pieces of information. This is known as an information gap task, which is a basic task type in TBLT. Other task types include problem solving, opinion exchange, values clarification and so on. Notice that, although there is no explicit focus on pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary, students need to mobilize their linguistic resources in order to achieve the goal of the task. Notice also that there is a concrete outcome that goes beyond the manipulation of linguistic forms. The task has a sense of completeness, and at the end of the task learners are able to evaluate how well they have done.

In short, while pedagogical tasks should always have some kind of relationship to real-world tasks, the relationship may be somewhat tenuous. However tenuous the relationship might be, the link between the classroom and the world beyond the classroom should be clear to the learners.



Despite their diversity, most task definitions in the literature have several characteristics in common. Skehan (1998) synthesizes the views of a number of writers, and suggests that pedagogical tasks exhibit five key characteristics. If you refer back to the discussion of the vignette earlier in this section, you will find exemplification and elaboration on these features.<sup>1</sup>

- Meaning is primary.
- Learners are not given other people's meanings to regurgitate.
- There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.
- Task completion has some priority.
- The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

## **The conceptual and empirical bases of TBLT**

TBLT draws strength from the following key principles:

- The point of departure for developing courses and materials is the development of an inventory of learner needs rather than an inventory of phonological, lexical and grammatical items.
- Learners develop the ability to communicate in a language through using the language rather than studying and memorizing bits of the linguistic system.
- Learners' own personal experiences are central to the learning process.
- There is a focus on learning processes and strategies as well as on language content.
- Classroom language learning is systematically linked to learning outside of the classroom (what I will refer to as task authenticity).
- Learners are exposed to authentic listening and reading texts.

In this section, I will elaborate upon each of these principles.

### ***The point of departure for pedagogy***

The 'traditional' approach to pedagogy is rooted in the three language systems: the phonological, the lexical and the grammatical. These systems are analyzed and broken down into their component parts, which are then taught separately, one at a time. The task for the language learner is subsequently to put these language 'bits' back together in order to communicate. In other words, they have to 'synthesize' the elements (Wilkins, 1976).

The alternative approach is to begin not with the language but with the learner. Under this approach, curriculum developers and materials designers begin with an inventory of the sorts of things that learners will actually or potentially need to do with language. In the classroom, learners engage with authentic and/or naturalistic texts, and are required to analyze the language into its component parts. Analytical approaches include TBLT, project-based language teaching, network-based instruction and content-based instruction (CBI). Project-based language teaching, network-based instruction and CBI are discussed in the next section.

Wilkins (1976) provides the following articulation of analytical approaches:

Prior analysis of the total language system into a set of discrete pieces of language that is a necessary precondition for the adoption of a synthetic approach is largely superfluous. . . . [Such approaches] are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning languages and the kinds of language that are necessary to meet these purposes.

(p. 13)

### ***Learning through doing***

In TBLT, the learner acquires the language primarily through using the language in carefully structured situations. Proponents of a 'strong' interpretation of TBLT argue that communicative engagement in tasks provides the necessary and sufficient condition for second language acquisition. In other words, there is no point in focusing on form, as communicative engagement provides the necessary and sufficient condition for language acquisition (Krashen, 1981, 1982). Proponents of a 'weak' interpretation (of which I am one) argue that a systematic focus on language systems is also healthy for language acquisition. Theoretical and empirical support for this position can be found in Doughty and Williams (1998). This edited collection presents original studies demonstrating the benefits of a focus on language form within communicative language teaching. Contributors to the collection argue that we need to move beyond the dichotomous notion that the only options in second language teaching are either to adhere to a traditional grammar only approach or to eschew the teaching of grammar altogether.

### ***Learners' own experiences as a point of departure***

The notion of learning through doing has its roots in experiential learning which sees education as a process of building bridges between what learners already know and what they have to learn. Experiential learning has diverse origins, drawing on Dewey's (1938) progressive philosophy of education, Lewin's (1936) social psychology and Piaget's (1972) developmental psychology. The work of Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1969) in humanistic psychology has also been influential.

The most articulate application of experiential learning to language teaching is provided by Kohonen (1992), who writes that:

Experiential learning theory provides the basic philosophical view of learning as part of personal growth. The goal is to enable the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning. This process means a gradual shift of the initiative to the learner, encouraging him or her to bring in personal contributions and experiences. Instead of the teacher setting the tasks and standards of acceptable performance, the learner is increasingly in charge of his or her own learning.

(p. 37)

In many respects, his model can be seen as a theoretical blueprint for TBLT, as can be seen in the following principles for action, which are a synthesis of Kohonen's (1992) paper.

- Encourage the transformation of knowledge within the learner rather than the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the learner.
- Encourage learners to participate actively in small, collaborative groups. Embrace a holistic attitude towards subject matter rather than a static, atomistic and hierarchical attitude.
- Emphasize process rather than product, learning how to learn, self-inquiry, social and communication skills.
- Encourage self-directed rather than teacher-directed learning.
- Promote intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation.

The principles see learning as a collaborative, transformative rather than transmissive process, one in which the teacher creates an environment within which the learners take control of their own learning processes. Self-direction and learning-how-to-learn are seen as central to the mastery of content.

### **Focus on learning strategies**

While not a necessary component of TBLT, a focus on learning strategies and processes has emerged as an important concomitant of the approach.<sup>2</sup> Sensitizing learners to the processes underlying their learning is particularly important for learners who come to the TBLT classroom from a 'traditional' classroom, and who may not recognize or accept task-based language learning as legitimate. Learners' perceptions about what they should contribute to task completion, and their views about the nature and demands of the task, as well as their perceptions of the situation in which the task takes place, will all influence task outcomes. We cannot know for certain how learners will actually go about completing a task, and it is certainly unwise to assume that the way we look at a task will be the way that learners look at it. There is evidence to suggest that, while we as teachers are focusing on one thing, learners may well be focusing on something else. For example, learners may be looking for opportunities to practice grammar in tasks designed to focus them on exchanging meaning. Conversely, they may focus on meaning in activities designed to get them practicing grammatical forms. Recent classroom research has also shown that learners consistently transform the nature, purpose and outcomes of a task in the course of completing it (Chan, 2010).

One way to reconcile these mismatches between teachers' and learners' views is to add a focus on learning strategies and learning-how-to-learn. If learners can develop a reflective attitude towards the intention of the task designer and their own preferences and attitudes towards language learning, perceptual gaps revealed by research may be reduced.

### **Task authenticity**

As I indicated at the opening of this chapter, the point of departure for designing task-based curricula and materials is an inventory of the kinds of things that the learner will actually or potentially need to do in the world outside the classroom. There is thus an automatic link between the pedagogical world and the experiential world. There should be systematic links between the world of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. The closer the link between the pedagogical and the experiential worlds, the greater the task authenticity.

### Text authenticity

In addition to task authenticity, text authenticity is an important feature of TBLT. Text authenticity refers to the use of spoken and written material that has been produced for purposes of communication not for purposes of language teaching. The issue here is not whether or not authentic materials should be used, but what combination of authentic, simulated and specially written materials provide learners with optimal learning opportunities. Specially written texts display for learners features of the phonological, lexical and grammatical systems. Input is simplified for beginning learners, and patterns are made explicit. While such texts are necessary, they do not prepare learners for the challenge of coping with the language they will encounter in the real world outside the classroom. Scaffolded,<sup>3</sup> in-class opportunities to process authentic aural and written texts are intended to assist learners to develop strategies for comprehending such texts in the world outside the classroom.

### Classroom applications

One issue that has surfaced many times since the development of CLT has been the place of grammar. At one extreme, as we have already seen, is the view that a focus on grammar is not necessary for successful second language acquisition (Krashen, 1981, 1982). At the other extreme is the notion that grammar is central to the acquisitional process (Doughty and Williams, 1998). Somewhere in the middle is the notion that an incidental focus on form can be helpful (Long and Robinson, 1999).

Ellis (2003) draws a useful distinction between 'focused' and 'unfocused' tasks. Unfocused tasks are not designed with a particular grammatical form in mind, and learners are free to use whatever linguistic resources they have at their disposal to complete the task. Here is a guided role play which exemplifies an unfocused task. Although some of the grammatical items that students taking part in the role play will need might be predictable, they are not required for successful completion of the task.

Work in pairs. One student looks at card A. The other looks at card B. Practice the conversation.

#### Card A

You have two free tickets to the movies and want to invite your friend sometime on the weekend.

A Check if B has any free time on the weekend.

B \_\_\_\_\_

A Suggest Friday, which is the most convenient time for you.

B \_\_\_\_\_

A Try to persuade B to change his/her plans.

B \_\_\_\_\_

A Agree reluctantly. Suggest a time and place to meet.

*Card B*

Your friend has two free tickets to the movies, and wants to invite you sometime on the weekend.

A \_\_\_\_\_

B Tell A you have some free time.

A \_\_\_\_\_

B Say that Friday night is not convenient. Give a reason.

A \_\_\_\_\_

B Refuse. Suggest Saturday afternoon.

A \_\_\_\_\_

B Agree.

According to Ellis (2003) focused tasks, on the other hand:

... aim to induce learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, for example, a grammatical structure. Of course, this processing must occur as a result of performing activities that satisfy the key criteria of a task, i.e. that language is used pragmatically to achieve some non-linguistic outcome. Therefore, the target form cannot be specified in the rubric of the task. Focused tasks, then, have two aims: one is to stimulate communicative language use (as with unfocused tasks), the other is to target the use of a particular predetermined target feature.

(p. 16)

‘Picture difference’ tasks can be used to practice a wide variety of grammatical structures. In this task type, students work in pairs. Each student has a different version of a picture. The differences may be subtle or not so subtle. Without looking at each other’s picture, the students have to describe their picture to their partner and identify the differences. If you want your students to practice prepositions of place, the picture might show an untidy bedroom with certain items in different places. In Picture A, for example, there may be a backpack on the desk. In Picture B, the backpack is under the bed. This should lead to interactions such as the following.

A: Is there a backpack in your picture?

B: Yes, there is. It’s under the bed.

A: Oh, in my picture, it’s on the desk.

The task is a focused one because it cannot be completed successfully without the use of appropriate prepositions.

This type of task can readily be modified for learners at different proficiency levels or for mixed ability classes simply by modifying the instructions. Weaker students can be instructed to find five differences, and average students to find nine differences. The better students might simply be told to *find as many differences as you can*.

The examples of tasks provided so far have been relatively closed, that is, there is a single or limited number of correct answers. For beginners and lower-ability students, it is best for tasks to be relatively closed, as they provide a greater degree of security, and the students are able to self-check whether or not they got the answer right. However, as students become more proficient, it is good to introduce more open-ended tasks where there is no one right answer. ‘Opinion exchange’ tasks, such as the following, are typically open-ended.

- A Work in groups of three–five. Brainstorm, and come up with a list of the five most helpful inventions, and the five most annoying inventions.

**Helpful inventions**

*Example:* Satellite navigation systems for cars

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

**Annoying inventions**

*Example:* Downloadable cell phone ring tones

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

- B Share your lists with the class, and give reasons for your opinions.

Decision-making tasks can be more or less open-ended depending on the amount of information provided and the parameters within which the task must be completed. The decision-making task in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter is an example of a relatively closed task, as there is really only one logical conclusion. The following task, on the other hand, is much more open-ended.

This task can encourage creativity, the use of personal experience and, occasionally, considerable negotiation. I once observed a group completing a version of the task in which one student argued against the seemingly obvious choice of taking a cell phone. She had been on a similar hike and had taken her cell phone, which proved to be useless, as there was no service in the remote area where they were hiking.

The task also exploits the principle of task repetition. The students get two opportunities to negotiate and come up with a single composite list. Although the actual substance of the discussion will vary from Phase B to Phase C, depending on the items chosen, the functional language will be similar (agreeing, disagreeing, raising objections, giving reasons, etc.). Plough and Gass (1993) have argued the case for task repetition, showing that the increased familiarity with the task can lead to greater fluency and more complex language, although if this is overdone it can also lead to boredom. Bygate (1996) demonstrated that boredom can be avoided by making simple modifications, as in the case above. Learners are, in effect, being given the opportunity to rehearse the task.

- A You are going on a weekend hiking trip with your friends to a remote part of the countryside. The weather forecast is for hot sunny days and cold nights. Look at the following list of items and decide on 10 items to take.

Flashlight  
 Map of the area  
 Plastic rain coat  
 Umbrella  
 Matches  
 Cell phone  
 First-aid kit  
 One quart of water  
 Pair of sunglasses  
 Warm jacket  
 Energy bars  
 Large plastic sheet  
 Spare pair of hiking shoes  
 Compass  
 Watch  
 Pair of shorts  
 Flares  
 Hunting knife

- B Work with two other students. Share your lists and come up with a composite list of 10 items.
- C Now join with another group of students, share your two composite lists and come up with a single composite list.

### ***Relating TBLT to project-based, network-based and content-based instruction***

#### **Project-based instruction**

Projects are ‘super-tasks’ which incorporate a number of self-contained but interrelated subsidiary tasks. In the real world, a project might be getting a job or renting an apartment. Subsidiary tasks in getting a job might include writing a résumé, evaluating/rank-ordering positions available advertisements for their suitability (in terms of salary, location, match to qualifications and experience), making an appointment, taking part in an interview, and so on. Renting an apartment would involve deciding on a suitable suburb or neighborhood, identifying desirable facilities (proximity to public transportation, shops or recreational facilities), rank-ordering properties to let according to price and location, making an appointment to inspect an apartment, and so on.

In their book on project-based instruction, Ribe and Vidal (1993) argue that there have been three phases, or ‘generations’, in the evolution of TBLT. In the first generation, the focus was on developing communicative ability in a specific area of language through simulations and problem solving. The second generation includes communicative development, but extends it to cognitive development as well. Third-generation tasks involve language and

cognitive development but go a step further, aiming at the development of the whole learner, using foreign language learning as a vehicle. Language learning thus transcends the utilitarian development of skills for communicating and becomes a truly educational endeavor.

Ribe and Vidal (1993) provide the following example of a third-generation task, or project:

*Designing an alternative world*

- 1 Students and teachers brainstorm aspects of their environment they like and those they would like to see improved. These may include changes to the geographical setting, nature, animal-life, housing, society, family, leisure activities, politics etc.
- 2 Students are put into groups according to common interests. The groups identify the language and information they need. The students carry out individual and group research on the selected topics. The students discuss aspects of this 'Alternative reality' and then report back. They decide on the different ways (stories, recording, games etc.) to link all the research and present the final project.
- 3 Students present the topic and evaluate the activity.

(Ribe and Vidal, 1993: 3)

Ribe and Vidal (1993: 4) articulate the following characteristics of third-generation tasks:

- They are open and flexible and it is the students who occupy centre stage.
- They involve the teacher and students negotiating objectives, planning together, monitoring and evaluating processes and results.
- They incorporate the students' previous knowledge and personal experiences.
- They appeal to the students' imagination, creativity and affectivity.
- The scope and length of the task can be quite extensive.
- The thematic content is related to the students' immediate environment and interests.
- They require the use of all the language skills and organizational strategies.
- Language is approached globally, not sequentially, according to the needs created by the task.

In this list, you can see echoes of many of the principles already discussed. Language is seen as a dynamic 'organic' entity. An experiential approach is taken to learning, with learners' own experiences as the point of departure for learning. There is a strong focus on learning strategies. Finally, there is a linking of the classroom to the wider world beyond the classroom.

Content-based instruction

CBI refers to classrooms in which all or part of the instructional content is adapted from other subjects on the school curriculum such as science, math, social studies and so on. By integrating language and academic content, learners are receiving instruction that is both interesting and relevant: The subject area



content provides a rich context for the learning of language (Brinton, 2001, 2003).

Brinton (2003) describes three different 'prototype' models of content-based instruction: theme-based language instruction; sheltered content instruction; and adjunct instruction. These models vary according to the type of students and the setting in which they are learning, the lesson focus (whether the focus is on content, language or both), the source of content, and the degree of coordination between the language and content teachers.

A theme-based approach is typically adopted in classes with students from diverse backgrounds. The themes therefore have to be broad enough to cater to this diversity as well as being age appropriate. For elementary or junior high school students, the theme might be friendship (from social science) or endangered species (from science). For older students aiming at college entry, themes might include advertising or health. Courses following this model are very similar to TBLT courses for general purposes, where units of work are usually based around themes such as 'entertainment', 'transportation' and 'neighborhoods'.

The following sample task was designed for a group of older adolescents/young adults who are preparing for college entry. It is taken from a unit on Personal Health and Hygiene.

How healthy are you?

- 1 Complete the following survey. Circle the responses that are true for you and then add up the numbers in the brackets.

*Eats red meat*

- every day (1)
- 3–5 times a week (2)
- once a week (3)
- once a month (4)
- 3–5 times a year (5)
- never (6)

*Eats fruit and vegetables*

- every day (6)
- 3–5 times a week (5)
- once a week (4)
- once a month (3)
- 3–5 times a year (2)
- never (1)

*Drinks alcohol*

- every day (6)
- 3–5 times a week (5)
- once a week (4)
- once a month (3)
- 3–5 times a year (2)
- never (1)

*Walks*

- every day (6)
- 3–5 times a week (5)
- once a week (4)
- once a month (3)
- 3–5 times a year (2)
- never (1)

*Plays sports or does exercise*

- every day (6)
- 3–5 times a week (5)
- once a week (4)
- once a month (3)
- 3–5 times a year (2)
- never (1)

*Smokes cigarette*

- every day (1)
- 3–5 times a week (2)
- once a week (3)
- once a month (4)
- 3–5 times a year (5)
- never (6)

- 2 Now compare your responses with three or four other students. Who is the healthiest person in the group? (The higher the score, the better!)

Sheltered content courses exist in all educational sectors, although they are generally found in secondary and post-secondary settings. The term *sheltered* refers to the fact that the second language learners are separated from the native speakers of the language. Instruction is delivered by content teachers who have received special ESL training.

## Sample task

In a junior high school science class, ESL learners work in small groups. They have two sets of cards, one set showing pictures of insects, birds and animals, the other containing the names of the insects, birds and animals.

Step 1 is a matching task, in which the students have to match the pictures and the vocabulary cards.

Step 2 is a classification task in which students have to group the pictures together according to the category to which they belong.

In the adjunct model, students are concurrently enrolled in both a language class and a content class. While the classes meet separately, the language and content instructors collaborate in planning their classes so that the instruction is coordinated.

The following task is an end of semester assessment task for first year Architecture students at an English medium university in Asia. All students are required to take a four credit English for Architecture course. The major project in the course is to design and build a scale model of an architectural project. At the end of the course, the students are required to give a 10-minute oral presentation, for which they are assessed.

*English for Architecture*  
*Assessment task guidelines*

At the end of the course, you are required to give a 10-minute oral presentation based on your scale model. If you wish, you may accompany your talk with a PowerPoint presentation.

Your English instructor and the professor of Architectural Design will jointly assess you. Your presentation will be assessed in terms of:

- Language (grammar, vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation)
- Content (mastery of architectural concepts, feasibility of the design)
- Organization (clear introduction and overview, body and conclusion)
- Style (confidence, ability to maintain interest)

Detailed assessment criteria for each of these areas are attached.

From these descriptions and examples, you can see that CBI and TBLT are closely related. I see CBI as a variant of TBLT. TBLT provides the pedagogical principles and methodology, while academic subject areas provide the content (as compared with the types of TBLT courses described elsewhere in this chapter where, for example, content might be derived from a needs analysis of everyday survival needs of immigrants).

### Network-based language teaching and learning

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and particularly Internet-based instruction have rapidly become an integral part of the design and delivery of education. This is particularly true of language learning and teaching. Initial skepticism at the notion of learning language online has given way to a broad acceptance that there are aspects of language learning and teaching that can be more effectively done online than in face-to-face instruction. Technology has four major roles to play in second language pedagogy (Nunan, 2011):

- as a carrier of content;
- as an instructional practice tool;

- as a learning management tool;
- as a communication device.

As a carrier of content, technology gives learners access to authentic spoken and written data as well as information on the three linguistics systems (the phonological, lexical and grammatical). As an instructional practice tool, it provides opportunities for learners to practice the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as well as doing a wide range of drills and exercises. As a learning management tool, it enables the teacher and learners to organize their learning in various ways, to monitor progress, and to keep records of achievement. Finally, as a communication device, it provides learners with opportunities for authentic spoken and written communication with other language users.

In this section, I want to focus on one form of CALL: network-based language teaching (NBLT). Warschauer and Kern (2000) define NBLT as follows:

NBLT is language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks. Whereas CALL has traditionally been associated with self-contained, programmed applications such as tutorials, drill, simulations, instructional games, tests, and so on, NBLT represents a new and different side of CALL, where human-to-human communication is the focus. Language learners with access to the Internet . . . can now potentially communicate with native speakers (or other language learners) all over the world twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, from school, home, or work.

(Warschauer and Kern, 2000: 1)

NBLT is pertinent to TBLT as I have defined and discussed it in this chapter for several reasons. Firstly, it gives learners access to an enormous amount of authentic spoken and written data. Secondly, it enables learners to function autonomously, and to develop their language skills through doing. Thirdly, and probably most importantly, particularly for learners studying in foreign as opposed to second language contexts, it provides a means for authentic interaction. It thus fulfils three of the four roles for technology summarized above. It is as a communication device that NBLT becomes particularly potent, as Warschauer and Kern have made clear.

In a study into task-based language learning via audiovisual networks, Zahner, Fauverge and Wong (2000) set out to evaluate the suitability of task-based language learning to networked environments. A group of university students in England studying French were teamed up with a group of French students in Paris who were studying English. They had to collaborate to complete two large-scale tasks. (These were more like projects, as I have defined these above.) For example, one task was to develop and present a marketing strategy for a French company trying to break into the British market. Student interactions were recorded and analyzed. The researchers concluded that networked environments were particularly suited to collaborative, task-based learning.

## **Future trends**

Crystal ball gazing has always been an uncertain undertaking. In our increasingly uncertain era, it becomes even more problematic. However, for the record,

here are my predictions of trends that are not specific to TBLT, but I believe will have an impact on TBLT.

### ***Impact of English as a global language***

The emergence of English as a global language has strengthened the rationale for a task-based approach to language pedagogy because it gives learners in EFL environments not only the opportunity, but indeed the need, to use the language for authentic communication. English becomes a tool for communication rather than an object of study. This trend is almost certain to increase. Millions of language learners around the world will have opportunities for the authentic use of language.

### ***Greater focus on intercultural issues***

Ownership of English can no longer be claimed by any one country or society. There are now more second language users than first language users. It is a truism that language and culture go hand in hand. The question, however, is *whose culture?* This question will come under increasing scrutiny in the years ahead, and will have a significant impact on the nature of task-based language programs.

### ***Increasingly important impact of technology***

Technology has become an integral part of all aspects of life. In language education, it is also pervasive. In the past, it has given learners convenient access to authentic data. In the future, it will provide access to and opportunities for authentic interaction on a global scale. The Internet will provide opportunities for learners to engage in authentic communication with other users around the world.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, my aim has been to provide an overview of TBLT. At the beginning of the chapter, I demonstrated TBLT 'in action' in the form of a classroom vignette, and set out some general design considerations. The bulk of the chapter is then given over to defining 'task', summarizing the empirical and conceptual basis of TBLT, in the process elaborating on a number of key principles. Although TBLT has been around since the 1980s it is only in recent years that the concept has begun to gain traction at the level of classroom practice. This may seem surprising, but it shouldn't be. The rule of thumb for any significant innovation to enter the bloodstream of an educational system is between 20 and 30 years.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I:

- located TBLT within a broad curriculum framework;
- described the essential characteristics of TBLT;

- offered a definition of TBLT;
- explored relationships between TBLT, project-based teaching, network-based teaching and CBI;
- indicated some of the future trends that will have an impact on TBLT.

### Discussion questions

- 1 What do you see as the pros and cons of synthetic and analytical approaches to language teaching?
- 2 What is the relationship between TBLT and other related approaches such as project-based, network-based and content-based instruction?
- 3 What do you see as the three most important principles connecting these different approaches?
- 4 What rationale is provided in the chapter for a focus on learning strategies?
- 5 What is meant by 'text authenticity' and 'task authenticity'?
- 6 What is your position on the place of form-focused instruction in TBLT?

### Suggested activities

- 1 Write a short narrative of your own language learning history. Analyze the narrative. Can you find evidence of some of the principles discussed in this chapter such as a focus on learning strategies, activation through real-world language use, exposure to authentic texts, etc.?
- 2 Think of a project, for example planning a trip to an unknown place or designing an ideal weekend for a group of visiting students to your town/city. Divide a class of students into groups, and have them prepare a plan for the project using the following pro forma adapted from Ribe and Vidal (1993: 44).

*Class project*

Title .....

*Group work*

Title .....

- 1 Make a list of the themes and sub-themes you would like to deal with.

- 2 Add any information you already know to each theme and sub-theme.

- 3 Make a list of the places where you can find the information you need.

In school

Outside school

- 4 Make a list of the language you think you are going to need.

- 5 Get ready to tell another group about your lists.  
Listen to the other group and see if you have any needs in common.

- 3 Design a unit of work following the model below.

## Notes

- 1 See also Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001), Willis and Willis (2001) and Ellis (2003).
- 2 Note, from the preceding section, the centrality of learning processes in Kohonen's scheme of things.

<i>Step 1 Scaffolding</i>	<i>Example</i>
Create a number of schema building tasks that introduce initial vocabulary, language and context for the task.	Look at newspaper advertisements for renting accommodation. Identify key words (written as abbreviations), and match people with accommodation.
<i>Step 2 Controlled practice</i> Give learners controlled practice in the target language vocabulary, structures and functions.	<i>Example</i> Listen to a model conversation between two people discussing accommodation options and practice the conversation. Practice again using information from the advertisements in step 1.
<i>Step 3 Authentic listening</i> Give learners authentic listening practice.	<i>Example</i> Listen to several native speakers inquiring about accommodation and match the conversations with newspaper ads.
<i>Step 4 Focus on linguistic elements</i> Focus learners on an aspect of pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar.	<i>Example</i> Listen again to conversations and note intonation contours. Use cue words to write complete questions and answers involving comparatives (cheaper, closer, more spacious, etc.).
<i>Step 5 Freer practice</i> Provide freer practice.	<i>Example</i> Pair work information gap role play. Student A plays the part of a potential tenant. Make a note of needs and then call a rental agent. Student B plays the part of a rental agent. Use ads, and offer partner suitable accommodation.
<i>Step 6 Pedagogical task</i> Have learners complete the target task.	<i>Example</i> Group work discussion and decision-making task. Look at a set of advertisements and decide on the most suitable place to rent.
<i>Step 7 Learning strategies</i> Focus learners on an aspect of the learning process.	<i>Example</i> Get students to list 10 new words and two new grammar points. Have students review three learning goals and, on a three point scale, evaluate how well they can perform these goals.

Adapted from Nunan (2004: 34–35).

- 3 A scaffolded instructional sequence is one in which the learning process is facilitated by supporting frameworks. (The term ‘scaffold’ has been appropriated from the building industry and is used metaphorically.) In a reading lesson based on an authentic reading text, the teacher might scaffold the learning by pre-teaching difficult vocabulary, building up background knowledge of the topic by asking a series of leading questions, engaging in a pre-reading discussion, and so on.

## Further reading

Ellis, R. 2003. *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Provides a detailed examination of the research basis for task-based language learning and teaching, and explores the relationship between research, teaching and tasks.

Nunan, D. 2004. *Task-Based Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A comprehensive introduction to TBLT for practicing teachers and teachers in preparation. The book deals with the theory, research and practice of TBLT.

## Link

This site is intended as a resource for all teachers interested in using TBLT. It provides a range of resources, including teaching materials and lesson plans.

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## Appendix: Checklist for evaluating tasks

The following checklist was designed to enable comprehensive evaluation of pedagogical tasks. Select three or four tasks that are familiar to you and evaluate them using the checklists. What strengths and weaknesses of the tasks emerged as a result of this exercise? What modifications would you make to the tasks in light of the evaluation?

### Goals and rationale

- To what extent is the goal or goals of the task obvious a) to you b) to your students?
- Is the task appropriate to the learners' proficiency level?
- To what extent does the task reflect a real-world or pedagogic rationale? Is this appropriate?
- Does the task encourage learners to apply classroom learning to the real world?
- What beliefs about the nature of language and learning are inherent in the task?
- Is the task likely to be interesting and motivating to the students?

### Input

- What form does the input take?

- Is it authentic?
- If not, is it appropriate to the goal of the task?

### **Procedures**

- Are the procedures appropriate to the communicative goals of the task?
- If not, can they be modified to make them more appropriate?
- Is the task designed to stimulate students to use bottom-up or top-down processing skills?
- Is there an information gap or problem which might prompt a negotiation of meaning?
- Are the procedures appropriate to the input data?
- Are the procedures designed in a way which will allow learners to communicate and cooperate in groups?
- Is there a learning strategies dimension, and is this made explicit to the learners?
- Is there a focus on form aspect and, if so, how is this realized?

### **Roles and settings**

- What learner and teacher roles are inherent in the task?
- Are they appropriate?
- What levels of complexity are there in the classroom organization implicit in the task?
- Is the setting confined to the classroom?

### **Implementation**

- Does the task actually engage the learners' interests?
- Do the procedures prompt genuine communicative interaction among students?
- To what extent are learners encouraged to negotiate meaning?
- Does anything unexpected occur as the task is being carried out?
- What type of language is actually stimulated by the tasks?
- Is this different from what might have been predicted?

### **Grading and integration**

- Is the task at the appropriate level of difficulty for the students?
- If not, is there any way in which the task might be modified in order to make it either easier or more challenging?
- Is the task so structured that it can be undertaken at different levels of difficulty?
- What are the principles upon which the tasks are sequenced?
- Do tasks exhibit the 'task continuity' principle?
- Are a range of macroskills integrated into the sequence of tasks?
- If not, can you think of ways in which they might be integrated?
- At the level of the unit or lesson, are communicative tasks integrated with other activities and exercises designed to provide learners with mastery of the linguistic system?

- If not, are there ways in which such activities might be introduced?
- Do the tasks incorporate exercises in learning-how-to-learn?
- If not, are there ways in which such exercises might be introduced?

### **Assessment and evaluation**

- What means exist for the teacher to determine how successfully the learners have performed?
- Does the task have built into it some means whereby learners might judge how well they have performed?
- Is the task realistic in terms of the resources and teacher expertise it demands?

(Source: Nunan, 2004: 174–175)

## CHAPTER 8

# THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

Since the 1970s, massive conceptual changes have taken place in our views of language and language pedagogy. These have been accompanied by an explosion in research, and prescriptions for pedagogical action. The emergence of English as a global language has thrust that language to the forefront in trade, politics, diplomacy, education, the media and entertainment. Despite this, we know comparatively little about the impact of this emergence on policies and practices in different parts of the world. In this chapter, I report on the results of a large-scale investigation into such an impact in the Asia-Pacific region. Although more than ten years have passed since the study was carried out, the outcomes and conclusions remain pertinent today.

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### Abstract

The notion of English as a global language has gained considerable currency in recent years, both in education and the media. However, there is relatively little information on the impact of English as a global language on policies and practices in educational systems around the world. This paper presents the results of an investigation into the place of English in the curriculum in several countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The study indicates that the emergence of English as a global language is having a considerable impact on policies and practices in all countries surveyed. However, it also reveals some significant problems including confusion and inconsistency at the level of policy, particularly regarding the issue of age of initial instruction, inequity regarding access to effective language instruction, inadequately trained and skilled teachers, and a disjunction between curriculum rhetoric and pedagogical reality.

### Introduction

It is now commonplace to hear of English as a global language not only in educational contexts, but also in the popular media. (Although, for a countervailing

view, see Wallraff, 2000, who argues that, for example, the spread of Spanish in the United States indicates that English is not sweeping all before it.) The demand for English language and English language education has exploded with economic globalization. It is the language of business, technology, science, the Internet, popular entertainment and even sports. In academic contexts, Swales (1987) estimates that over 50 percent of the millions of academic papers published each year are written in English, and the percentage is growing year by year, and entire volumes dedicated to the subject are beginning to appear. (See, for example, Crystal, 1997; Block and Cameron, 2002.)

In a study commissioned by the British Council, Graddol (1997) speaks about the apparently 'unstoppable' trend towards global English usage, but also points out that this could change suddenly and unexpectedly due to some relatively minor change in world events. At the moment, however, the pre-eminent position of English does not appear to be under challenge.

Anecdotal evidence has it that the response to this demand by governments around the world has been to introduce English as a compulsory subject at younger and younger ages, often without adequate funding, teacher education for elementary school teachers, or the development of curricula and materials for younger learners. In business, industry and government, workers are increasingly expected to develop proficiency in English. This has created many challenges for TESOL educators internationally.

Currently, there is a need for basic research to answer many questions being raised by governments, bureaucracies and industry. The bodies need to know how and where to direct scarce resources (this is a pressing need in developing countries). There is an urgent need to know the costs and benefits of training students and employees in English language. A related issue has to do with the effect of the spread of English on indigenous languages and a possible denial of the right of children to be educated in their own language (Crystal, 2000; Nunan, 2001).

Despite all of the talk in the media, at regional and international conferences and so on, there is relatively little information on the impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in educational systems around the world. At a very general level, there is a need for data on the English language requirements of workers in a wide range of workplaces and occupations, from multinational corporations to government and quasi-government institutions such as hospitals and other public institutions. Although industry specific needs analyses are common, there are few empirical investigations into the specific nature of the demand for English in the everyday working lives of individuals outside of fields such as tourism. One of the few empirical studies in the literature (Forey and Nunan, 2002) established that there was an urgent need for professional English of a particular kind. However, the study only looked at a single profession (accountancy) within a single geographical region (Hong Kong).

Assuming the need for English is reality rather than myth, data are needed on the most effective/cost-effective means of meeting this need, and on the curriculum modes that are most effective (for example traditional classroom-based, self-access, independent learning, distance learning, technology and web-based). Related to these imperatives is the need for data on the implications of the changing workplace and economy globally for the teaching, learning and use of English, often with speakers of other non-standard varieties of English. The pressure being imposed by globalization is illustrated by the multinational

corporation in Latin America that recently made English the official language of the corporation. Middle-managers within the corporation are required to reach salary-dependent English language benchmarks by the end of 2003.

Turning to education, we need to know the impact of English as a global language on the educational practices and medium of instruction in educational systems around the world. At the present moment, governments and ministries of education are framing policies and implementing practices in the language area without adequately considering the implications of such policies and practices on the lives of the teachers and students they affect (Szulc-Kurpaska, 1996).

Finally, at a socio-cultural level, we need to know the effect of the emergence of English as a global language on first and indigenous language development, and, in developing countries, a key question is the extent to which access to English is a mechanism for determining who has access to economic advancement and who does not. (For discussion, see Bruthiaux, 2002; Kachru, 1992; Phillipson, 1992.) The Philippine government has become so concerned at the effect of English as a medium of instruction on schoolchildren, it is proposing that schools switch from English and Filipino to the vernacular from Grade One (PCER Report, 2000).

Studies have shown that this change will make students stay in, rather than drop out of, school, learn better, quicker and more permanently, and will in fact be able to use the first language as a bridge to more effective learning in English and Filipino as well as facilitate the development of their cognitive maturity.

(p. xviii)

## **The study**

While a great deal has been written about the emergence of English as a global language, there is little concrete data on its impact at the levels of policy and practice. It is therefore the purpose of this study to seek descriptive and interpretive accounts of the place of English within the educational systems of a range of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Data collection procedures included documentary analysis, as well as guided interviews with informants representing different stakeholders within the educational systems of the countries that took part in the study.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the study is to look at the impact of English as a global language on a range of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The countries selected for the study were Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. These countries present a wide range of contrasting characteristics and features, from developed to developing, ex-colonial to independent, large to small, and culturally diverse to culturally cohesive.

## **Questions**

While all of the issues and questions canvassed in the background section to this paper are important, I have chosen to limit this investigation to the impact

of English as a global language on policy and practice within school education. While it is important to have data on other sectors such as universities, workplace education and adult vocational programs, these were not a major focus of the study. To include them would have made the study too large.

The questions addressed in the study are as follows:

### **General questions**

Has the emergence of English as a global language influenced language planning and policy-making? If so, in what ways has this influence manifested itself?

What are the principles underpinning the English language curriculum and how are they manifested in practice?

What is the impact of English as a global language on educational practices and medium of instruction?

What are the costs and benefits, in terms of time, money and effort, of teaching English as a foreign language?

Has the introduction of English had an impact, or is it likely to have an impact in the future, on first language/indigenous language development?

### **Specific questions**

At what age and grade level is English introduced as a compulsory subject?

How many hours per week and weeks per year is English taught for each grade level?

What plans, if any, are there to lower the age at which English is introduced as a compulsory subject?

To what extent is English used as a medium of instruction for other subjects?

### **Data collection procedures**

There were two principal sources of data for this study. The first was published documentation from governmental and quasi-governmental sources. The second was guided interviews with 67 informants representing different interests and perspectives within their respective systems.

The first step in the process was the collection and analysis of published policy statements, documents and programs. These were drawn from a number of sources including recent books, articles, government reports, syllabuses and curriculum documents.

These documents provided a backdrop for more detailed data collection through guided interviews with informants in the countries concerned. The informants represented different interests and perspectives within the educational sectors of each country including teachers, teacher educators, ministry officials and those involved in the publishing industry. A basic profile of informants is provided in Table 8.1.

Prior to the interview, informants were provided with background to the study along with the questions set out above. The interviews were carried out through a range of media: face to face, telephone, email and, in one instance,



Table 8.1 Positions and number of informants by country

Positions	Countries						
	China	Hong Kong	Malaysia	Japan	Taiwan	Korea	Vietnam
Ministry officials	2	6	0	0	0	0	1
Academics/ teacher trainers	4	4	2	2	2	3	2
Publishers	2	3	0	1	2	1	0
Teachers	5	6	4	5	7	3	1

an Internet chat line. Choice of media was left to the informants and did not appear to affect the nature of the information provided. Once all the data for each country had been provided, it was analyzed and a first draft of the present article was circulated to informants so that they could verify the data and the interpretations derived from them.

## Data

In this section, I present the results of the investigation as a series of country-by-country case studies. I then identify some common themes that emerge from the data.

### China

Despite its centralized approach to education, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of what is going on in China because of the sheer size and diversity of the country. There seems to be a general 'divide' between the wealthier coastal regions and the interior. Another divide is that between urban and non-urban areas. (For current reviews of education reform in China see Cortazzi and Jin, 1996, Lam and Chow, 2001, Liu, 1996, and the special July 2002 issue of *World Englishes*, which is devoted to an examination of English in China.)

Data for China were collected through documentary analysis and face-to-face interviews. Informants included: the Managing Director for China of a multinational publishing company, the Director, Foreign Languages Department, People's Education Press (a company controlling approximately 70 percent of the school textbook market in China), the Dean, Institute of Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and the General-Secretary, National Foreign Language Teaching Association, Education Society of China. Documents consulted included the syllabuses for the middle school and high school system.

From September 2001, English was introduced as a compulsory subject in Grade 3 in all elementary schools which have suitably qualified teachers. (What 'suitably qualified' meant was not defined by the informant who provided this information.) This represents a lowering of the age of compulsory instruction from 11 to 9. In primary school, there are generally two to three 40 minute lessons a week. In secondary school, there are either five or six 45 minute lessons.

According to the informants, the impact of English as a global language has been considerable. Entry requirements to university, promotional prospects in the workplace, and curricula and published materials have all been affected. Teaching

English is emerging as a private business outside regular schools and universities, particularly in big cities such as Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. (One publishing industry informant told me that her company estimated that there were 600,000 new enrollments in private conversation schools every four to six months.)

Two major influences that were frequently mentioned by informants included the joining of the World Trade Organization and the awarding of the 2008 Olympic Games to Beijing. The Degree Committee of the State Council has approved 45 Sino-foreign joint programs which can grant degrees from foreign universities in China. All programs are taught bilingually (English and Chinese).

In September 2001, all colleges and universities under the control of the Ministry of Education were instructed to use English as the main teaching language in the following courses: information technology, biotechnology, new-material technology, finance, foreign trade, economics and law. Other courses would be added as resources became available. Criteria for selecting courses were that they facilitate entry to the World Trade Organization, and that they not be 'politically sensitive'. (Politically sensitive courses have to be taught using textbooks written in China. Courses that are not politically sensitive can use foreign textbooks.) The main obstacle to implementing this policy was obtaining suitably qualified teachers (Chan, 2001).

The latest syllabi across the board are based on a functional/notional view of English, and concepts such as communicative language teaching and learner-centeredness are referred to frequently. The latest university syllabi also refer to interdisciplinary support between English and other areas such as law and commerce.

Because of factors mentioned above such as size, it is difficult to determine the extent to which classroom realities reflect official rhetoric. Coastal areas and big cities have an advantage over inland and rural areas in terms of resources, with inevitable implications for what happens at the level of the classroom.

There appears to be little impact of English on Chinese language itself despite the eagerness of young people to practice their English. According to recent studies, there is little code mixing between English and Chinese (Bolton and Tong, 2002).

In general, content-based instruction is not a feature of the Chinese educational system. However, some of the top schools in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai have started teaching math and science in English. More and more universities are starting to teach courses in English, and this is becoming a requirement in certain subject areas. This move to content-based instruction at the tertiary level will increasingly affect English language instruction at the secondary level.

### **Hong Kong**

As a former colony of Great Britain where English remains an official language alongside Cantonese and, increasingly, Putonghua, Hong Kong has a special place in this survey. Schools are classified into five (soon to be reduced to three) 'bands' which are meant to reflect students' ability, but which, not surprisingly, also reflect the socioeconomic status of the students and their parents. Schools are classified as either Chinese medium of instruction (CMI) or English medium of instruction (EMI), the latter embracing a range of immersion-type curriculum models (Marsh, Hau and Kong, 2000). Until the late 1990s, the number of 'English medium' schools outnumbered those of the Chinese medium schools

by a ratio of nine to one, even though many students and some teachers were incompetent in the English language. (A government report in 1990 stated that 70 percent of schoolchildren were unable to cope with English as a medium of instruction.) In practice, in many EMI schools, while the textbooks, written work and examinations were in English, oral/aural communication was in Cantonese, and students only encountered English in its written form. This resulted in students who were functionally illiterate in Chinese on the one hand, and unable to communicate effectively in spoken English on the other.

Data for the Hong Kong survey were also collected from face-to-face interviews. These included interviews with the Chief Executive, Curriculum Development Institute, and the President of the North Asia subsidiary of an international publishing company that controls most of the ELT publishing market in the SAR. Two focus group interviews were also carried out with a group of six primary and secondary school teachers. A range of government documents were also consulted. These included the latest government reviews and consultation documents, as well as the English language syllabuses for primary and secondary school.

In all schools, English is introduced in Primary 1 when children are six. In EMI schools, it is also used as the teaching medium across the curriculum. In primary school, English is taught from four to six hours a week. In secondary school, it is taught from seven to nine hours a week. (The school year is 35–37 weeks long.)

There is no official plan to lower the age at which English is offered as a compulsory subject, which would entail it being offered at kindergarten. However, some English is introduced in almost all kindergartens in the form of the alphabet and key words.

English symbolizes wealth and power in Hong Kong, and this has not changed since 1997. For more than a century, English has been the prevalent language in government, the legislature and the judiciary. Hong Kong is a major international trading, business, banking and communications center, and English is seen as a key to maintaining its position in these areas (Forey and Nunan, 2002).

The prevailing rhetoric is that as a global language English is a crucial tool for economic, social and technological advancement. This is made explicit in government policy documents. For example, in the Curriculum Development Council's *Syllabuses for Secondary Schools: English Language (Secondary 1–5)* (Curriculum Development Council, 1999), it is pointed out that:

As a result of the number, size and influence of the English-speaking countries in the world and their scientific, technological, economic, commercial and cultural influences, English has become a truly international language. English is the language of international communication, commerce, education and entertainment. The mastery of English therefore opens up new possibilities for our students in career advancement, educational attainment and personal fulfilment.

(p. 1)

The influence of English as a global language on policy and practice is also evident in another key government document (Curriculum Development Council, 2000), which states that English language education seeks to provide a curriculum framework that contributes to enhancing the language proficiency of young people for the following reasons:

to enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong so that it will be able to maintain its position as an international business centre and a knowledge-based economy, capable of rising to the challenges of global competition;  
to help our young people to develop a worldwide outlook through broadening their knowledge and experience;  
to enable our young people to use English proficiently for study, work, leisure and effective interaction in different cultural environments; and  
to help our young people succeed in life and find greater personal fulfilment.

(p. 2)

From the rhetoric of recently published government documents, as well as government funded initiatives such as the Target-Oriented Curriculum, communicative language teaching is the current philosophical orthodoxy in Hong Kong (Education Commission, 1990). At the classroom level, this philosophy is reflected in task-based language teaching and a learner-centered approach to instruction. Learner-centeredness is reflected in the strong links that are drawn between language instruction and a focus on the development of thinking skills and skills in learning how to learn. The development of information technology skills, another key aspect of government policy, is also reflected in curriculum documents on language teaching.

The rhetoric has been reinforced through teacher training courses, workshops and seminars. However, the extent to which these are implemented depends very much on individual schools and individual teachers.

English still plays a more prominent role as a medium of instruction in Hong Kong than in most other countries surveyed in this study. At the primary level, English is taught as a subject in most schools, except for a very small number of elite schools which introduce English as a medium of instruction in year 3 or 4 in certain subjects. In secondary schools, English is used as a medium of instruction for all subjects except Chinese related subjects in all English medium schools from forms one through three. In Chinese medium schools, English is taught only as a subject, with extra resources to support the teaching and learning of English as a second/foreign language. However, from form four onwards, schools are free to decide their own medium of instruction. A lot of Chinese medium schools switch back to using English as a medium of instruction to help students prepare for the public examinations in forms five and seven and to prepare them for tertiary studies (English is mandated as the language of tertiary education in Hong Kong).

Despite the obsession with English and the huge amounts of money poured into English language education at every level, government and business remain (and have become increasingly) dissatisfied with the English language competence of students graduating out of secondary school and university. The skills and competence of teachers have most recently been called into question, and the government has introduced an extremely controversial measure – a system of benchmarking of English teachers' competence in the language. Another, somewhat less controversial measure has been the introduction of a Native English Teacher (NET) scheme under which native-speaking teachers of English are recruited to provide appropriate models of English that the Education Department seems to think Cantonese-speaking teachers of English lack.

A major problem throughout the region is a lack of trained teachers. Despite its relative wealth, Hong Kong is no exception. When it took power from Britain in 1997, the new government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region announced that all teachers would be required to have a degree and a professional teaching qualification. At that time, 70.6 percent of secondary teachers and 37.2 percent of primary teachers had such qualifications. Since then, the figures have dropped to 57 percent for secondary teachers and 27.8 percent for primary teachers. Commenting on the figures, the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau attributed the problem to a shortage of resources:

There is a mismatch between the supply and demand for teachers, with a long term shortage of teachers in certain subjects, especially English language.

(*South China Morning Post*, October 21, 2002)

### **Malaysia**

As a former colony of Britain, Malaysia also represents a special case within this survey. In national (Malay) schools, English is introduced at the age of 7. Vernacular (Mandarin and Tamil) schools introduce it two years later. In general, students receive 90 minutes of instruction a week in primary school, and four hours a week in secondary school. There are no plans to introduce English as a compulsory subject any earlier.

The emergence of English as a global language, and a perception that English language skills are in decline have caused concern at the national government level. The government has commissioned the University of Malaya to investigate and identify causes of deterioration in English among university students.

The rhetoric in Malaysia is that of the communicative movement. It was one of the first countries in the world to embrace a task-based approach to instruction. According to one informant, 'Implementation [of task-based learning] is constrained by formal top-down traditional methods. It is difficult to assess whether the tasks meet any of the students' own purposes.' Another view was that 'Anecdotal evidence supported by reactions from the Ministry of Education suggests that practice is far removed from the curriculum "rhetoric". At a more fundamental level, a significant proportion of teachers, especially in the rural areas, do not have sufficient command of the English language to conduct their classes with confidence.'

There is considerable consternation in Malaysia at the emergence of English as a global language because of its potential impact on the national language, which is heavily promoted for political reasons. In the 1960s and 1970s, English was abandoned as a medium of instruction, and it was only during the 1990s that the government realized that the loss of English would adversely affect their plans for economic development. Deterioration in the standards of English is seen as a major obstacle to the aspiration that Malaysia be declared a developed nation by 2020. (As one informant said, 'Global English has caught them [the government] cold'.)

The financial commitment to teaching English is considerable. Prior to independence, standards of English were high. However, success of the national language policy has had an adverse impact on English. English is now a foreign rather than an additional language. This is especially so in rural areas. Parents

who can afford to do so are increasingly arranging for private English tuition for their children.

In national schools (the preponderance), the language is exclusively Malay. In the vernacular schools, it is Mandarin and Tamil. The Ministry of Education is working on the reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction in science and technical subjects at school and university (the use of English for teaching math and science was implemented in January 2003). All university lecturers in public universities who speak Tamil are obliged to use English. In practice, code-switching is common, particularly in specialist subject areas such as medicine, architecture and engineering.

## **Japan**

Japan has nine years of compulsory education, six years of primary schooling and three years of junior high schooling. English is introduced as a compulsory subject in the first year of junior high, when learners are 12. Students receive three 50 minute lessons a week in each of the three years of junior high.

While there are no plans to lower the age at which English is taught as a compulsory subject, from 2002 all public primary schools will introduce a new course called 'general studies'. This course will be offered three times a week to all 3rd through 6th graders and is supposed to cover foreign languages, including English, global education, welfare and the environment. According to one informant, many primary schools are planning to introduce English, focusing on listening and speaking, within the general studies program. Because the Ministry of Education has stipulated that the purpose is not to 'teach' English in primary school, but to provide 'fun' time in English, there will be no textbooks. The amount of English taught, and the actual content will vary from school to school.

Official government rhetoric is captured in the *Course of Study for Lower Secondary Schools* published by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, Japan, 1999), which sets out the following objectives:

To deepen students' understanding of language and culture through learning a foreign language and to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it by developing their basic ability for practical communication such as listening or speaking skills.

To implement real communicative activities for students to communicate their feelings or thoughts.

To help students find proper expressions for each concrete case or situation in such communicative activities.

(p. 2)

According to another informant, although the government rhetoric stresses the development of practical communication skills, this is rarely reflected at the classroom level, where the emphasis is on the development of reading and writing skills for the purposes of passing entrance examinations into senior high school and college.

Japan has a scheme called the JET scheme (similar to the NET scheme in Hong Kong) which has been in operation for about 15 years. Under this scheme,

around 5,000 native speakers of English provide support instruction in the schools. The salary for each JET teacher is around 300,000 yen a month, making the scheme a costly one. As in Hong Kong, the scheme is controversial, and has been criticized by both Japanese teachers and JET teachers, although some aspects of the scheme have met with qualified success (Sturman, 1992).

## **Taiwan**

In Taiwan, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the Managing Director of an international publishing company (currently developing core English texts for the Taiwanese public school system), the President of the English Teachers Association of Taiwan, and English teachers from a number of schools and colleges including the Chinese Culture University, Providence University, Fu Jen High School, National Tainan First Junior High School and National Kaohsiung University of Applied Sciences. Ministry of Education position papers and syllabuses were also consulted.

The emergence of English as a global language has had a major influence on the government's thinking. Taiwan aims to be a major economic global player, and sees the economic imperative as a major impetus for promoting the learning of English. Thus, in September 2001, English was introduced in Grade 5 (in which learners are 10–11 years of age), and this was extended to Grade 1 in 2002. Classes are one to two hours per week during the two 20-week semesters in each school year.

A recently published document on the English curriculum sets out the official government line on principles underpinning the curriculum (Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2000):

The objective of the elementary/junior high school curriculum should be to instill a basic communicative ability, to prepare students to take a global perspective, and to give individuals confidence in communicating in the global area ('thus improving the nation's competitiveness'). Elementary and middle schools should provide a natural and enjoyable language learning environment.

(p. 2)

All informants agree that Ministry expectations are far above what most schools and teachers can deliver. A major issue is the training of teachers, and teacher training programs are very limited. Even teachers who have completed training programs have problems both in their own skills in English and in their pedagogy, particularly when it comes to teaching younger learners. This is because most teacher trainers have no experience themselves in teaching younger learners.

The entire public school system is undergoing tremendous change with the introduction of a new initiative entitled 'the Nine Year Program' which aims to integrate Chinese, English, information technology and computing skills, math, science and social studies in elementary and junior high school.

Governmental investment is large, but the hope is that this will have a 'knock-on' effect resulting in higher levels of proficiency in English at the university level. (Informants generally agreed that the level of English at the university level is still quite low when it comes to communicative use.)

According to the informants, content-based instruction is a foreign concept in Taiwan. Whether this changes in the future, as appears to be the case in some contexts in Mainland China, is difficult to say, and informants were unable to offer a perspective on this point.

### **Korea**

English is introduced in the 3rd grade, when children are 9. The school system has 30 weeks per year, and the intensity is as follows. Students in grades 3 through 6 have one to two hours of instruction a week, grades 7 through 9 have from two to four hours a week, and four hours per week are allocated to students in grades 10, 11 and 12. The age for compulsory English was lowered from 13 to 9 in 1997. There are no plans to lower it further (Kwon, 2000; Park, 2000).

English is a major concern in all areas of government, business and education. All colleges and universities require 3–12 credit hours of English, and many universities and employers require minimum TOEIC/TOEFL scores from those seeking either education or employment.

In 1995, the 6th National Curriculum adopted a communicative, grammatical-functional syllabus. In 2001, the Ministry of Education adopted a policy of teaching English through English, which encourages the use of English in English classes. However, as with other countries in the region, a major problem is that many English teachers simply do not have the proficiency, and therefore the confidence, to be able to teach in English. Park (2000: 1) asserts that this is a major problem that can only be addressed through teacher education.

Although the policy and textbooks changed to a communicative orientation in 1995, most teachers do not have the English language competence or methodological skills to implement the policy, and there has not been a great deal of change from the grammar-translation approach. Some universities pay incentive money to encourage teachers to teach in English.

A tremendous amount of money has been spent on teaching and learning English. On average, Korean families spend one-third of their income on private lessons for their children in English, art and music. Increasing numbers of English medium schools are also beginning to appear, and the largest of these have student enrollments running into the hundreds of thousands.

Some concern has been expressed at the negative effect on national identity of the early introduction of English. However, this concern seems to be somewhat muted, and does not seem to have had much effect on the explosion in demand for English language. A more serious concern, articulated by several informants, was the negative impact on L1 literacy of introducing English language literacy before students had attained literacy in Korean.

In relation to content-based instruction, according to the informants, in elementary and secondary schools, other subjects are not generally taught in English. There is some content-based instruction at the university level.

### **Vietnam**

Economically, the poorest country surveyed was Vietnam, with extremely limited resources for all forms of education. Policy and practice issues relating to English were there of particular interest.

The school year in Vietnam runs for 30 weeks, from September through May.



Children begin elementary school at the age of 6, and spend five years at that level before graduating to junior high school at age 11–12. It is here that they begin studying English as a compulsory subject. They have four 45 minute periods a week. In senior high school (years 10, 11 and 12), English is also compulsory, although the number of periods per week drops from four to three.

The above data represent the number of lessons prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Training. In practice, there is considerable variation. For example, in Ho Chi Minh City, schools may teach up to six periods a week. In addition, there are schools that specialize in English where students may study the subject for up to 14 periods a week.

Some thought has been given to lowering the age at which English is introduced as a compulsory subject. A limited number of elementary schools in Ho Chi Minh City have begun experimental classes in English. In addition to government run schools, there are private language schools in a number of cities and towns across the country, and in these schools children may begin learning English as young as 5 or 6.

The prevailing rhetoric in Vietnam appears to be ‘communicative’, with an integrated four skills focus in the early years. In the senior years, the focus is exclusively on reading. Thus, the introduction to the Year 7 textbook states that the aim is to ‘train the students for all the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing as the basis to develop the reading skill in the following year’. By Year 12, the focus is firmly on reading. Although the Year 12 textbook says the aim is ‘to help the student to review and systematize the material he [sic] has learnt, and at the same time continue to train his four language skills: listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing’, it also states that ‘more emphasis is to be placed on the development of the student’s reading skill’.

Despite the lip service paid to communicative language teaching, there appears to be a large gap between the rhetoric and the reality. When reflecting on her own experience as an English teacher in Vietnam, one informant stated that:

All the books present a lot of exercises on grammar and reading comprehension. I used to teach high school and left after 18 years. From my experience, the students cannot use the language in communicating. There used to be no tapes for listening, and there are no listening exercises. They have made the tapes for listening now, but the books are just the same.

The globalization of English has had a considerable impact on policy and practice in Vietnam. In the words of one informant:

It can be said that the English has become a must for success in both studying and working. One of the most common requirements in job advertisements is proficiency in English (another is computer skills). Since 1986, the year the government began to apply its open door policy, language centers have mushroomed all over Ho Chi Minh City and other big cities and towns. English is also compulsory at university level and it helps both students and workers to gain scholarships to go abroad.

In this section, I have presented the data yielded by documentary analysis and informant interviews. These data are summarized in Table 8.2.

*Table 8.2 Age at which English is introduced as a compulsory subject, intensity, and impact of English as a global language*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Age at which English is introduced as a compulsory subject</i>	<i>Intensity</i>	<i>Impact of English as a global language</i>
China	Grade 3/Age 9	Primary: 2–3 × 40 minute lessons/week Secondary: 5–6 × 45 minute lessons	September 2001 lowering of age of compulsory English from 11 to 9. Teaching English emerging as a private business. English increasingly significant as an entry requirement to university. English enhances promotional prospects in the workplace.
Hong Kong	Year 1/Age 6	Primary: 4–6 hours/week Secondary: 7–9 hours/week	Overwhelming government and business concern that Hong Kong will lose out economically if English language skills are not enhanced.
Malaysia	Age 7	Primary: 90 minutes/week Secondary: 4 hours/week	Concern at falling standards and fear that Malaysia may lose competitive advantage. Fearful of impact on the national language.
Japan	First year of junior high/Age 12	Junior high: 3 × 50 minute lessons/week	From 2002, increase primary students' exposure to English, especially listening and speaking.
Taiwan	Grade 5/Age 10–11	1–2 hours/week	Possibility of introducing English from Grade 1.
Korea	Grade 3/Age 9	Grades 3–6: 1–2 hours/week Grades 7–9: 2–4 hours/week Grades 10–12: 4 hours/week	Age at which English is compulsory lowered from 13 to 9. Huge financial investment in teaching English. Concern at negative effect on national identity of early introduction of English.
Vietnam	Grade 6/Age 11–12	Grades 6–9: 4 × 45 minute lessons/week Grades 10–12: 3 × 45 minutes/week	English compulsory from junior high school (age 11–12). English plays a central role in both education and employment. English proficiency now a requirement for most professional employment.

## Discussion

Despite considerable region-to-region variation, a number of generalizations can be derived from the data.

### ***Impact of English as a global language***

The key question underlying this investigation is: What is the impact on educational policies and practice of the emergence of English as a global language? From this investigation, there is little doubt that the impact has been considerable. For example, despite considerable country-by-country variation (see Table 8.2), in most countries, the age at which English is a compulsory subject has shifted down in recent years, a shift that is predicated on the importance of English as a global language. Underlying the shift is an assumption on the part of governments and ministries of education that, when it comes to learning a foreign language, the younger the starting date of instruction the better. This view seems to be firmly entrenched, despite its controversial nature. (See, for example, Marinova-Todd, Bradford Marshall and Snow, 2000, 2001; Hyltens-tam and Abrahamsson, 2001.)

### ***Access to English***

In most countries, there is considerable inequity in terms of access to effective English language instruction. In China, for instance, the have versus have not/city versus rural divides and the inequities flowing from these divides have been exacerbated by the growing importance of English and the inequitable access to quality instruction in English. In a number of other countries, informants spoke frankly of the fact that the quality of English language education in the public sector was so poor that 'no one learns English in school'. These informants reported that the only children who stood a chance of learning English were those whose parents could afford to send them for private after-school language instruction. The data from this study strongly support the assertion by Bruthiaux (2002) that:

In most markets, the consumers of English language education are the relatively well-off, already far beyond the stage of mere survival. To the extent that the severely poor are aware of it at all, the global spread of English is a sideshow compared with the issue of basic economic development and poverty reduction.

(p. 290)

### ***Teacher education***

Teacher education and the English language skills of teachers in public sector institutions are inadequate according to the informants in all countries included in this study. While this may not be surprising in developing countries such as China and Vietnam, it must be of major concern in more developed countries such as Malaysia and Hong Kong where millions of dollars have been poured into teacher education in recent years. Of even greater concern has to be the widespread use of non-qualified teachers throughout the region, and a decline

in the percentage of qualified English teachers in public schools in places such as Hong Kong.

### **Principles of language education**

All countries subscribe to principles of communicative language teaching, and in a number task-based language teaching (the latest methodological realization of CLT) is the central pillar of governmental rhetoric. However, in all countries surveyed it would seem that rhetoric rather than reality is the order of the day. Poor English skills on the part of teachers as well as inadequate preparation make it very difficult, if not impossible, for many teachers to implement CLT in their classrooms. In places such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, where principles of TBLT are beginning to appear in commercial textbooks aimed at the public school sector, the ideas are poorly understood by most teachers and it remains to be seen whether teachers will be able to use these materials effectively.

### **Effect on learners' home language**

There is growing concern in the literature at the impact of English on first and vernacular languages (Crystal, 2000; PCER Report, 2000; Phillipson, 1992; Shorris, 2000). However, this did not emerge as a major concern in this study.

How, then, do these observations articulate with what research says about the conditions of successful foreign language instruction, particularly in the early years? The following quote from a recent *TESOL Quarterly* article by Marinova-Todd, Bradford Marshall and Snow (2000) is a useful framing statement for this question.

Investment in elementary foreign language education may well be worth it, but only if the teachers are native or native-like speakers and well trained in the needs of younger learners; if the early learning opportunities are built upon with consistent well-planned, ongoing instruction in the higher grades; and if the learners are given some opportunities for authentic communicative experiences in the target language. Decisions to introduce foreign language instruction in the elementary grades should be weighed against the costs to other components of the school curriculum: as far as we know, there are no good studies showing that foreign language instruction is worth more than additional time invested in math, science, music, art, or even basic L1 literacy.

(pp. 28–29)

I would point out that, while a high level of proficiency in the language is desirable, the authors of the quote go too far in asserting that elementary education will only be effective if teachers are 'native or native-like speakers'. Technology and rich, input-based programs can do a great deal to support teachers who do not have high levels of fluency in the target language (Anderson and Nunan, 2003).

According to the literature, access to rich input, from either native speakers, highly competent speakers of the language, or appropriate technology, is fundamental to the development of high level skills in the target language. However, in the countries surveyed, the English language proficiency of many teachers is

not sufficient to provide learners with the rich input needed for successful foreign language acquisition. The solution on the part of Hong Kong and Japan to import large numbers of native speakers has been extremely expensive, and has had mixed success, although, in the case of Hong Kong, at least, it is too early to provide a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of the scheme. My own view is that in the long term this investment would be better spent on programs to enhance the proficiency and professional skills of local teachers.

Another important, and related, feature of successful foreign language education is the opportunity for learners to take part in authentic communicative interaction. It is true that lip service is paid to communicative language teaching, and the principles of CLT are enshrined in all of the documents that were examined in preparing this study. However, all informants, in all the countries surveyed, reported a huge gap between ministerial rhetoric and classroom reality.

Teacher training is another priority. In particular, with the introduction of English in the primary school, teachers need special training in the needs of younger learners. Curricula, teaching methods and materials should meet the needs of the learners of different ages and at different stages. In reality, adequate and appropriate training is a major problem in all countries surveyed. In Hong Kong, the government has made serious efforts to enhance the professional skills of English teachers and has mandated the 'benchmarking' of English teachers. However, in all countries (as, indeed, in most other parts of the world), the development of a pedagogy that is appropriate for young learners is lacking. In addition, there is little evidence that differentiated curricula to meet the needs of learners at different chronological ages and stages have been developed or are being developed, although this is changing in some countries (the change being driven as much by forward-looking commercial publishers as by ministries of education).

Finally, in order to see consistent and measurable improvements in the target language, learners need adequate exposure to the target language (it has been estimated, as a rough rule of thumb, that learners need at least 200 hours per year systematic exposure to the language in instructional contexts for measurable progress to be seen). In actuality, in most countries, if they are lucky, students, particularly those in the early years, will receive, on average, 50–60 hours of instruction a year, which is less than one-third of the minimum number of hours needed for significant progress in a foreign language. The lucky ones, with parents who can afford it, will receive supplementary instruction in private after-school classes. If they are lucky enough to find themselves in schools run by qualified teachers, they may reach the critical mass of hours required to register genuine and long-lasting progress towards high levels of proficiency. If they do, indications are that they will reap significant economic rewards, and thus perpetuate or exacerbate the economic divide that exists in most countries – certainly in most of the countries that were surveyed. It must be a major concern to all those involved in English language education that the efforts currently in train do not appear to be reflected in significantly enhanced English language skills. Even in Hong Kong, where, on paper at least, there is considerably more English than in most other countries, many students leave high school with only the most limited ability to communicate in the language.

More fundamental than questions of the optimal age at which to introduce English as a foreign language and with what intensity is the question: Is English, in fact, a necessity in the countries in question?

The single most pervasive outcome of this study is that English language policies and practices have been implemented, often at significant cost to other aspects of the curriculum, without a clearly articulated rationale and without a detailed consideration of the costs and benefits of such policies and practices on the countries in question. Further, there is a widely articulated belief that, in public schools at least, these policies and practices are failing.

In countries where a considered response to the question posed above is 'yes', the following actions are recommended:

- a review of the starting age and intensity of foreign language instruction along with the articulation of a rationale for both the starting age and the intensity of instruction;
- an audit of the human and material resources allocated to English language instruction and an assessment of the adequacy of these in relation to the needs of the learners along with a cost/benefit analysis of English language education within the educational system as a whole;
- an investigation into the extent to which principles enshrined in official curriculum documentation are effectively realized at the level of classroom practice;
- an analysis of pre- and post-experience teacher education provisions and an assessment of the appropriateness of these;
- a critical review of the principles underlying the curriculum, and an assessment of the appropriateness of the principles to the context in which the curriculum is used;
- in cases where English is introduced before L1 literacy is fully established, an investigation into the effect of the introduction of a second language on L1 literacy and oracy development.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have presented the results of an investigation into the effect of the emergence of English as a global language on policies and practices in a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. A huge amount of money is being invested in providing English language resources, and this is happening at a time when other aspects of educational systems are being squeezed. There is evidence from this investigation that these resources are not achieving the instructional goals set by governments and bureaucracies in the region.

It is timely, then, for these governments and educational bureaucracies to review their policies on English language teaching. If, on reflection, it is decided that English is a necessity, and that the investment is worthwhile, it is crucial that steps be taken to ensure that teachers are adequately and appropriately trained in language teaching methodology appropriate to a range of learner ages and stages, that teachers' own language skills are significantly enhanced, that classroom realities meet curricular rhetoric, and that students have sufficient exposure to English in instructional contexts to meet instructional goals.

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## **PART II**

# LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language is the substance of my trade. In Part I, I focused on curriculum process, and although language content is woven through each of the chapters it is not foregrounded. In the chapters making up this part, language and culture in general, and discourse in particular, take center stage. Chapters 9 and 10 are extracted from my book *What Is This Thing Called Language?* Chapter 9 examines the nature of language systems. The central argument of the chapter is that discourse does not constitute a system, being categorically different from phonology, lexis and grammar. Chapter 10 explores spoken discourse, looking at how the phonological, lexical and grammatical systems work together in the creation of spoken discourse. In Chapter 11, I look at the emergence of narrative as a research genre in the context of learner-centered curriculum development, as well as at the use of learners' stories in pedagogy and research. The chapter reports on an empirical investigation into the language learning histories of 59 undergraduate students at the University of Hong Kong. Chapter 12 presents the results of an empirical investigation into languages and cultures in contact. The study illustrates the complex linguistic and cultural issues underlying even seemingly simple intercultural encounters. The final chapter in the part, Chapter 13, examines language from a somewhat different perspective, addressing the question of what it means to know a language.



## CHAPTER 9

# DISCOURSE AND LANGUAGE SYSTEMS

A central concept in my 2005/2012 book *What Is This Thing Called Language?* is that of language systems. One of the claims that I contest is that language consists of a hierarchical set of systems, beginning with the phoneme and culminating with discourse. I contend that discourse does not constitute a linguistic system, that it is qualitatively different from the phoneme, morpheme, word, clause and sentence.

This chapter is a compilation of pieces from different parts of the book. It pulls together the different strands of my argument into a single thread.

From *What Is This Thing Called Language?*, 1st edition, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 2nd edition, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

### Language systems

Linguists like to talk about systems: the sound system, the vocabulary system, the grammatical system, the semantic (or meaning) system, the communication system and so on. But what do they mean when they use the word ‘system’? Here are two dictionary definitions:

**system** n. 1. complex whole, set of connected things or parts, organized body of material or immaterial things.

(Concise Oxford Dictionary)

**system** n. 1. an assemblage or combination of things or parts forming a complex or unitary whole.

(Macquarie Dictionary)

Although definitions of *system* vary, most either state or imply the following:

- A system consists of a set of ‘things’, entities or parts.
- These are interconnected and interrelated in some way.
- There are rules and principles specifying how they are interconnected.
- The parts of a system work together to do a job.

There are open and closed systems. A closed system has a finite membership. In the natural world, closed systems include the digestive system and the solar system. Open systems admit new members from time to time. In language, some systems are relatively closed (for example the sound system), while others such as the lexical system are relatively open.

Language is commonly seen as a complex system consisting of a number of sub-systems (see, for example, van Lier, 1995). These sub-systems are set out in Figure 9.1.

From the figure, you can see that these sub-systems constitute a hierarchy, the sub-system above being assembled from the sub-system below. So morphemes are made up of phonemes, words consist of morphemes, phrases are made up from words and so on. When linguists talk of one system being made up from lower-order systems they use the term 'constituent structure' (Brown and Miller, 1988). Using lower-level elements to understand higher-level ones is known as bottom-up processing.

In this chapter, I will argue that the bottom six levels of language constitute linguistic sub-systems, but that the final level, discourse, does not. Phonemes belong to the sub-system of sounds, morphemes and words to the sub-system of lexicography, and phrases, clauses and utterances/sentences to the sub-system of grammar. Each has rules for determining 'well-formedness', that is, what counts as an acceptable sound, word and sentence, as well as rules for how they can be combined. As yet however, linguists have been unable to do the same thing for discourse because discourse is a process rather than a product. This highest level of linguistic analysis has defied concerted efforts to characterize it in terms of 'well-formedness' because, although discourse is partly a linguistic phenomenon, it is also a psychological phenomenon. It exists in the mind as much as it does on the page. This does not mean that it is not systematic, nor that it does not display some of the characteristics of a system. However, whether or not a piece of discourse is well-formed will be determined, not by the acceptable arrangement of lower-order elements, but by language users.

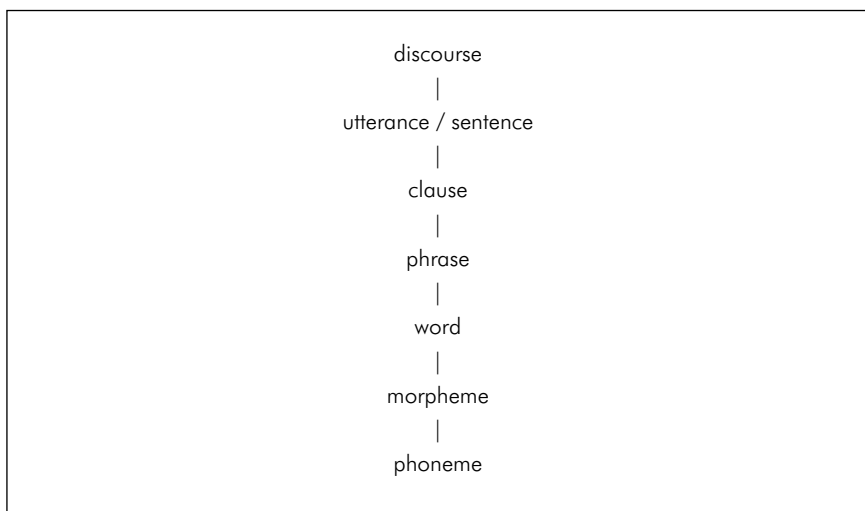


Figure 9.1 Linguistic sub-systems

Listeners, speakers, readers and writers draw on the lower-order sub-systems, along with other sources of information, in creating discourse. However, when it comes to discourse, well-formedness is not determined by the selection and arrangement of these lower-order elements; it is determined by meaning, and meaning resides, not on the page, but in the mind. Asking where the meaning system is to be found is akin to asking, as a foreign visitor to the English city of Oxford once did, 'Nice town, but where's the University?' I am not sure what his interlocutor said in reply, but an appropriate response might have been 'You're standing in it!' because the town *is* the University. They do not exist as separate entities.

## Sounds as a system

Sounds constitute the first of three sub-systems that all languages have for creating meaning. The second is the word system, and the third is the grammatical system. Each of these sub-systems constitutes a resource for making meanings, and each exists in a hierarchical relationship: words are made up of sounds; sentences and utterances are made up of words.

To what extent then do the sounds of a language constitute a system? The rather programmatic definitions quoted at the beginning of the chapter suggested that a system contains 'things' that are interconnected in systematic ways. In language, these 'things' are individual sounds which combine with each other in various ways. Most varieties of English contain around 46 different sounds. By combining this limited number of sounds, we can generate an infinite number of words. Think about it! Only a fraction of all possible combinations of these sounds are actually used in English, and yet they have generated hundreds of thousands of words.

## The lexical system

The second of our three basic linguistic systems is the lexical system. Not everyone agrees that words constitute a system. Kachru and Smith (2008: 110) argue that 'vocabulary is the least important aspect of linguistic structure – it is not systematic in the sense that sounds or grammatical patterns are'. I have a certain sympathy with their viewpoint, and thought long and hard before deciding that lexis *did* deserve to be thought of as a system. Reasons for adopting this stance are set out in the rest of this section.

When looked at as a system, the vocabulary of any language consists of closed class items and open class items. Closed class categories, also called function words or grammar words, are those to which no new items can be added. Prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, modal verbs and determiners consist of finite lists of words. Open classes include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Members of these classes are sometimes called content words. New items are being added to these categories by the minute, if not the second. The system also has rules for creating word families.

Content words enable us to talk about entities, events and states of affairs in the world. It is important that new content words can be added to the lexicon because otherwise the language would fossilize and we would not be able to express new realities. Sometimes the new words are 'one-offs', used only once to express a particular meaning. Recently, I heard a word that I had never heard before – in fact I don't think it had ever been uttered before, and may never be

uttered again. The word was *easify*. The speaker, an educator, said: *The basic function of the classroom is to easify the learning process for students*. Even though I had never heard the word before, and may never hear it again, I knew immediately what he meant.

Grammar words organize and relate content words to each other. They therefore carry meaning of an entirely different kind. Estimating the ratio of content words to grammar words gives a measure known as lexical density. The more content words, the higher the lexical density. Generally speaking, written texts display great lexical density than spoken texts.

At the beginning of this section, I referred to words as a system. Closed classes clearly constitute a system (or sub-systems if you like). We know all of the members of the modal verb class, how they relate to each other and what they do. Although new members can be added to open class items, I believe that they still fit the definition. Although we cannot pre-specify all of the nouns or verbs in English, because items will be added even as we try to list them, we know how they are formed, how they relate to each other and to closed class items, and what they do.

## The grammatical system

Word order is an important aspect of grammatical correctness. In fact, grammar is commonly defined as a set of rules for specifying acceptable word order. In English, word order is fundamentally important to meaning. *The man bit the dog* has a very different meaning from *The dog bit the man*. *Mike loves Julie* is very different from *Julie loves Mike*. The unintended humor in *The girl was followed by a small poodle wearing jeans* has been brought about by the separation of the phrase *wearing jeans* from the presumed wearer – *the girl*. Consider also the confusion in the following newspaper headline:

### DOG BREAKS WINDOW THAT HURTS WOMAN

As it stands, the headline suggests that a public spirited dog carried out a revenge attack on an offending pane of glass. Common sense suggests otherwise, but we have to read the newspaper account to confirm that the dog broke the window, and it was this that caused injury to the woman.

A woman resting outside her restaurant in Kowloon City was injured when glass fragments rained down onto her after a dog broke a window in a flat above.

(*South China Morning Post*, November 14, 2005: 14)

We can begin to unpick some of the issues surrounding the arrangement of information inside the sentence by looking at the elements that make up a simple sentence. The basic building block of the sentence is the phrase. Phrases are meaningful groups of words below the level of the sentence that cannot stand alone as sentences in their own right. A simple sentence must contain a noun phrase acting as the subject (S) and a verb phrase (V) which indicates some action or state of affairs relating to the subject. Depending on the nature of the verb, it can also contain phrases following the verb that act as objects (O), complements (C) and adverbials (A).

Objects are usually noun phrases that follow the main verb and answer the questions 'what?' or 'who(m)?'

My sister eats snails. (What does your sister eat?)

Tilly loves Richard. (Who does Tilly love?)

Some sentences may have an indirect object in addition to a direct object. In *I gave my wife some flowers*, *my wife* is the indirect object and *some flowers* is the direct object.

Complements are required to complete the meaning of certain verbs and, in simple sentences, define the subject in some way or provide additional information about it. They typically follow the verb *be* and let us know how the subject of the sentence looks, feels or seems. Subject complements describe or modify the subject of a sentence, while object complements do the same for the object of the sentence. The italicized words in the following sentences are complements:

Everyone was *happy*. (Subject complement)

They made Jack *redundant*. (Object complement)

Dolores seems *a little tipsy*. (Subject complement)

I've been keeping my room *tidy*. (Object complement)

Adverbials provide additional information about how, when, where or why. In other words, they elaborate on an event or a state of affairs. Adverbials hang out on the periphery of sentence structure. If we had a sporting team made up of these grammatical classes, adverbials would be carrying the oranges. They are, in most sentences, optional, and can be left out without rendering the sentence ungrammatical. Like other elements, they can be moved around within the sentence to provide prominence. It is also possible to interpolate a number of adverbials into a single sentence, although the usual effect of this is an unwieldy and overwritten sentence.

*Suddenly, as the clock struck midnight*, she rushed *quickly* from her chamber to meet her *mysterious* lover.

English is based on a small number of standard (or canonical) sentence patterns made up of the five basic phrase types described above. The most elemental pattern is Subject + Verb (S+V) as in *I cried*. Another basic pattern is Subject + Verb + Object (S+V+O) as in *I bought a ticket*. A third pattern is Subject + Verb + Object + Object (S+V+O+O) as in *I gave a bunch of flowers to my wife*. One thing worth noting about these different patterns is the important role played by the V or verb phrase, which can consist of a single word or a group of words (as in *I had been crying*, *I am going to buy* a ticket, *I should have given* a bunch of flowers to my wife). The verbal element is significant because not all verbs can take part in all patterns. While it is permissible to say *I cried*, it is not permissible to say *I bought*. The verb *to buy* must be followed by an object. (Verbs that do not need to be followed by O, C or A are called 'intransitive'; those that do are called 'transitive'.) Similarly, we can say *I bought a ticket* or *I bought a ticket for Sally*. In other words, the verb *to buy* can take part in both S+V+O and S+V+O+O patterns. The verb *to give*, however, can only take part



in S+V+O+O patterns – the exception being when it is a response to a question and the indirect object which is understood from the context can be omitted. For example:

A: What did you buy your wife?

B: I bought a bunch of flowers (for my wife)

or even

B: A bunch of flowers.

Notice that there are two acceptable variations on this structure. We can say *I bought a bunch of flowers for my wife* or *I bought my wife a bunch of flowers*. Looked at purely in terms of sentence-level grammar, both sentences are identical. However, from a communicative perspective, they have two different functions. In one the focus is on the flowers; in the other it is on my wife. It would be odd to answer the question *What did you buy your wife?* with *I bought the flowers for my wife*. Similarly, it would be strange to respond to the question *Who did you buy the flowers for?* with *I bought my wife a bunch of flowers*. The appropriate responses in each case are:

A: What did you buy your wife?

B: I bought my wife a bunch of flowers (or, more usually, A bunch of flowers)

and

A: Who did you buy the flowers for?

B: I bought the flowers for my wife (or My wife).

This discussion reminds us of the interconnectedness of grammar and lexis. As we saw above, the choice of verb will have an important bearing on grammatical acceptability. Here is an elaboration on that point, illustrating the importance of verb choice and direct and indirect object.

Consider the following sentences (an asterisk precedes words and sentences that are ungrammatical in English):

Beth sold the cookies to Eric.

Beth sold Eric the cookies.

Beth pulled the cookies to Eric.

\*Beth pulled Eric the cookies.

From the first two sentences, it is clear that a speaker of English can use one of two different grammatical structures for sentences containing both a direct object (*the cookies*) and indirect object (*Eric*). We can put the direct object after the verb followed by *to* and the indirect object. Or we can drop the *to* and switch the positions of the two objects. But notice that although the second structure seems to work fine for the verb *sold*, it does not sound right for most speakers of English for the verb *pulled* to be used in (4), despite the fact that both verbs behave similarly in (1) and (3).

(Cziko, 1995: 202)

Cziko points out that these constraints are not arbitrary, but depend on what are often quite subtle differences in the semantics of the verbs, and the meanings of syntactic constructions. In other words, there is a close interrelationship between the lexical and the grammatical systems.

## Genre

Elsewhere (Nunan, 1993), I introduced the notion of discourse ‘grammar’, that is, an approach to discourse mirroring that of sentence-level grammarians. The aim of the grammarian is to describe the rules that specify what is and is not a well-formed sentence (that is, they want to identify rules for grammaticality). In relation to spoken language, the attempt by discourse analysts (whom I called ‘super-sentence’ linguists) to specify the obligatory and optional elements for determining the ‘well-formedness’ of discourse has not been particularly successful. I have argued that the lack of success is due to the fact that discourse does not constitute a higher-order linguistic ‘layer’ over and above sounds, words and sentences: that there are, essentially, only three systems for creating messages.

However, there is one approach to text analysis that appears to offer some promise in identifying patterns in texts that go beyond the sentence. This is known as genre analysis. Genre analysis is an ancient practice going back to the Greeks, who studied recurring patterns in literary texts, and who were able to show how epics differed systematically from lyrics and so on. Their approach can be applied to the analysis of spoken as well as written language.

These days, the term is used to refer, not to the analysis of literary texts, but to the analysis of everyday, non-literary texts. The starting point for genre analysts is the overall purpose or function of a text. The purpose will determine the internal generic structure of the text as well as its key grammatical features. Questions such as ‘What is the purpose of this instruction booklet, narrative account or argumentative text?’ and ‘How is the purpose reflected in the overall structure of the text and the grammatical features that appear within it?’ form the point of departure for the analysis.

Common texts include recounts, narratives, procedures, reports, explanations, expositions and discussions. The particular function of each of these texts is as follows:

- *Recount*: to tell what happened, to document a sequence of events and evaluate their significance in some way.
- *Narrative*: to create a sequence of events culminating in a problem or crisis and a solution or resolution.
- *Procedure*: to instruct the reader on how to make or do something.
- *Report*: to present information on an event or circumstance.
- *Explanation*: to explain how and why something occurs.
- *Exposition*: to present an argument in favor of a proposition.
- *Discussion*: to look at an issue from a number of different perspectives before reaching a conclusion.

## Why discourse does not constitute a system

In this chapter, my contention is that, while discourse is central to language, in itself it does not constitute a linguistic system. Why is this so? I have hinted at an answer to this question at various points. At the beginning of the chapter, I argued that systems are complex wholes, sets of connected things or parts, or organized bodies of entities. The problem for language is that, as far as discourse and meaning are concerned, the connections are made in the mind. While we can't know what the future might bring, at present, the largest linguistic unit of analysis is the sentence. As an applied linguist, I may hold a minority position on this, but I can take comfort in the fact that I am not alone.

Of course, this is not to say that there are no 'larger' linguistic objects which are worth studying. Such larger objects as *conversations*, *discourse*, *stories* and *texts* are, without doubt, structured, and, indeed, research into these areas has often assumed that some notion of 'grammar' is applicable to them. This may be so, but we believe that any such 'grammar' will have a very different form . . . and will have to take account of a wide range of factors which extend beyond the knowledge of language.

(Radford et al., 1999: 279)

There are of course exceptions. These include formulaic language and certain adjacency pairs – a greeting demands a greeting in reply, so in a sense these fit the definition of a system. However, even here things are far from straightforward. Based on her ethnographic investigations of social communication in England, Fox observed that:

Greetings and introductions are such an awkward business for the English. The problem has become particularly acute since the decline of 'How do you do?' as the standard, all purpose greeting. The 'How do you do?' greeting – where the correct response is not to answer the question, but to repeat it back, 'How do you do?' like an echo of a well-trained parrot – is still in use in upper-class and upper-middle circles, but the rest are left floundering, never knowing quite what to say.

(Fox, 2004: 37)

The simple fact is that many if not most utterances can be followed by practically any other, and usually, with a little ingenuity, we can make a connection. The operative word here is 'make' or 'create'. Creating the connection occurs not on the page but in the mind.

Take the utterance *John's flight arrives at one*. The response *So does ours* is both cohesive (utterance and response contain linguistic connectives) and coherent (we instantly recognize them as being about the same thing). However, consider the following comment and response:

A: John's flight arrives at one.

B: I work at HappyMart.

Here, there are no overt linguistic connectors. However, if we recognize A's utterance as a request, *John's flight arrives at one*. *Can you pick him up?*, and

B's as a refusal and reason for not being able to comply with the request, *I work at HappyMart and don't get off until three*, then we can establish a functional connection between the two utterances.

Here is a more problematic pairing:

A: John's flight arrives at one.

B: The Pope died yesterday.

Although it demands a greater degree of ingenuity, we can still create a connection:

A: John is flying to Rome to be there for the passing of the Pope. His flight arrives at one.

B: Hmm, the Pope died yesterday. John will be disappointed.

While I generally avoid inventing discourse examples, the ones above do illustrate the point that connectivity, or coherence as it's also known, exists in the mind. Words provide signposts to meaning; they do not constitute the meaning. And discourse does not constitute a system!

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## CHAPTER 10

# DOING THINGS WITH SPOKEN LANGUAGE

This chapter explores the ways in which the three linguistic systems, the phonological, lexical and grammatical, work together to enable us to communicate through spoken language. The discussion is illustrated with original discourse samples which I have collected over many years from numerous contexts and environments.

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### Functions of spoken language

Just think for a minute of all the speaking tasks that you have carried out in the last 24 hours. Here is a selective list of some of the things I achieved through language yesterday. I:

- called a friend and reminded him about a dinner party I was having last night;
- took part in a meeting at the office;
- ordered a coffee in the faculty lounge;
- called my travel agent to see if I was still wait-listed on an upcoming flight from Sao Paulo to Miami (I was!);
- wished my daughter good luck for her school drama audition;
- over a coffee, asked a colleague about the plot of a movie she had seen the evening before;
- booked my car in for a service;
- ordered flowers for a colleague who is leaving;
- had a Cantonese lesson (some of which was conducted in English);
- discussed a research proposal with a graduate student.

This is a somewhat random list of the kinds of things we do through language every day. Although the tasks vary, the overall functions can be reduced to just

two: we use language to obtain goods (such as coffee and flowers) and services (a car service, flight information), and we socialize (wishing a daughter luck, talking with a friend about a movie). The first function (obtaining goods and services) is called the transactional and the second (socializing) the interpersonal function. Although we can separate the two for purposes of analysis, in many exchanges such as the following the two functions are woven together.

- A: Morning.  
 B: Morning.  
 A: Nice day again.  
 B: Yep. Gonna be another good one.  
 A: What can I get you?  
 B: Oh, coffee, thanks.  
 A: Regular or decaf?  
 B: Regular.  
 A: Cream and sugar?  
 B: Just a little cream.  
 A: Here you go.  
 B: Cheers.

The interpersonal dimension of an utterance is often signaled by specific linguistic devices such as modal verbs and adverbs.

Some of the features of language that we observed in the preceding chapter [of *What Is This Thing Called Language?*] are apparent in the conversation. Note in particular the extent to which ellipsis is a feature of the conversation. If you look at the internal workings of the conversation you will see that, in addition to an interweaving of the transactional and interpersonal functions, the conversation can be broken down into a series of two-utterance pairings, called adjacency pairs. All languages have these pairings, in which one type of utterance calls forth an expected response, for example:

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <i>Greet:</i>          | How are you, Dave?                        |
| <i>Greet:</i>          | Hi, Chris.                                |
| <i>Offer:</i>          | Would you like a coffee?                  |
| <i>Accept/decline:</i> | Thanks./No thanks.                        |
| <i>Apologize:</i>      | I'm sorry.                                |
| <i>Acknowledge:</i>    | That's OK.                                |
| <i>Assert:</i>         | I love Oprah.                             |
| <i>Agree/disagree:</i> | Yeah, she's great./Oh, I can't stand her. |

These are 'default' or expected pairings. When we greet someone, we expect a greeting in return. When we make an offer, we expect the other person either to accept or to decline our offer. In some ways, these pairings are similar to the grammatical ordering of words in sentences. As we saw in the last chapter, the standard word order in declarative statements is subject + verb + object (*The dog bit the man*). A deviation from this standard order such as verb + object + subject (*Bit the man, the dog [did]*) immediately attracts our attention, and

we ask ourselves *why* the speaker has chosen to shuffle the lexical cards in his linguistic deck in this way.

The same is true of conversations. As already noted, when we say *Good morning* to someone, we expect a *Good morning* in return. A reply such as *What's good about it?* is a deviation from the expected norm, and prompts us to wonder what the problem is with the other person.

Although adjacency pairs exist in all languages, they are not realized in the same way in different cultures. In most English cultures, a common Monday morning greeting is *How was your weekend?* The expected response is a brief one. *Fine!* or *Weather was lousy!* However, Paltridge (2008: 116) reports on a study of communication breakdowns in a multicultural workplace between English- and French-speaking workers. Citing Beal (1992), the original investigator, Paltridge reports that:

The French workers often responded to the everyday greeting 'Did you have a good weekend?' by stopping and telling the English-speaking workers all about their weekend. The English-speaking workers were irritated by this and did not realize that a French-speaker would not ask this question if they did not want a real (and complete) answer. They did not realize further that this is not a typical question French speakers would ask each other in a typical everyday conversational situation and, even though they sometimes responded by telling them about their weekend, they also saw the question as an invasion of their privacy. Expected follow-ups in the use of adjacency pairs, then, vary across languages and cultures.

## Key characteristics of conversation

In this section, I want to foreground some of the characteristics of spoken language that I will deal with in greater detail in the rest of the chapter. We will touch briefly on speech acts, the negotiation of meaning, and transactional and interpersonal interactions. (As we saw in the preceding section, transactional interactions take place when the speakers are trading goods or services. In interpersonal interactions, they are basically socializing.)

One of the challenges in learning to take part in conversations in a foreign language is knowing how to interpret and respond appropriately to speech acts that are indirect: that is, where the speakers do not mean what they say in a literal sense, and where 'inside-the-head' or background knowledge is required in order to determine what the speaker means. (Use of inside-the-head knowledge is known as top-down processing, and the theory of how this works is known as schema theory.) This point is illustrated in the following exchange, which was recorded between two co-workers in a multicultural workplace. A is a native speaker of English, while B is a second language speaker. Here, B interprets A's utterance as an invitation rather than as a formulaic farewell.

A: See you later.

B: What time?

A: What do you mean?

Here is a somewhat more complex piece displaying a number of features that are typical of casual conversation between intimates.

- J: It's a worry, isn't it?  
 B: What?  
 J: Your money (yes) organizing your money affairs.  
 B: 'Tis . . . a big worry.  
 C: Mmm.  
 J: I've got to manage my money to look after myself in my old age.  
 C: You're in it.  
 J: What?  
 C: You're in it – you're in your old age.  
 J: I might live for another ten years. Be . . .  
 C: . . . be a bloody miracle. [laughter]  
 B: What? What did she say?  
 C: Be a miracle – after the life you've led. If you'd led a nice sedentary existence, and hadn't drunk or smoked you might've been able to look forward to a telegram from the Queen.  
 B: Be a thrill!  
 J: A big thrill!

This is clearly an interpersonal rather than transactional interaction. It took place over afternoon tea late one afternoon between two elderly sisters, J and B, and J's daughter C. In her opening conversational gambit, J refers back to an earlier conversational topic, the financial concerns of the elderly. She makes an assertion, *It's a worry, isn't it?*, which would normally be followed by either an agreement or a disagreement. However, B's *What?* indicates that she is unsure of what exactly *it* refers to. J makes the topic (one's money, or lack of it) explicit, and B is able to complete the adjacency pair. Functionally, we therefore have the following sequence:

Assertion	
Clarification request	Insertion sequence
Clarification	
Agreement	

The *clarification request/clarification* make up what is known as an insertion sequence inside the adjacency pairing. Such insertion sequences are common in natural conversation, and can become quite complex.

- A: Peach Bellini, please.  
 B: Are you 21?  
 A: Why do you want to know?  
 B: We don't serve alcohol to anyone under 21.  
 A: Do I look as though I'm under 21?  
 B: That's beside the point. Can I see your ID, please?  
 A: Here.  
 B: Great. Thanks. One Bellini coming up.  
 A: Thanks.

The clarification requests illustrate an important characteristic of natural conversation: meanings don't come ready-made, but have to be negotiated between the participants in the conversation. In this regard they are different from movie



scripts and play scripts. In real life, uncertainty and misunderstandings are quite normal, and interlocutors are constantly using strategies such as requesting clarification (*What did you say?*), confirming that they have heard correctly (*Did you say X?*) and checking that the other participants in the conversation have comprehended correctly (*Do you follow?*) in order to avoid or resolve misunderstandings and ambiguities. J's *What?* in the earlier conversation is another example of a clarification request.

The conversational fragment about money worries among the elderly illustrates how much personal and cultural knowledge is required to make sense of many casual conversations, particularly when they take place between family members and other people who are intimately related. In order to appreciate this fragment fully, we need to know:

- the relationships between J, B and C;
- the fact that J is somewhat obsessed with money or, more precisely, the fear of being bereft of money in her old age;
- that B is quite hard of hearing;
- that C relieves her sense of frustration with her mother by humor which borders on the sarcastic;
- that the participants are citizens of a British Commonwealth country in which it was once customary to receive a telegram from the Queen on reaching the age of 100.

In contrast, many transactional encounters, such as the following telephone encounter in which the customer is making a cab booking, are devoid of any interpersonal elements. The interaction consists of a string of adjacency pairs (question/answer, question/answer) in which there is no negotiation of meaning. In contrast with the interpersonal extract above, the conversation is like a form of verbal ping-pong, with no misunderstandings and no competition for a conversational turn.

- Tape:* Hold the line, please. All our operators are currently busy. [music]  
*Operator:* Cabcharge – account name?  
*Customer:* Macquarie University.  
*Operator:* Passenger's name?  
*Customer:* Nunan.  
*Operator:* Pick-up address?  
*Customer:* 13 Finch Avenue, East Ryde.  
*Operator:* Is that a private house or flat?  
*Customer:* Yes.  
*Operator:* Going to?  
*Customer:* The airport.  
*Operator:* How many passengers?  
*Customer:* One.  
*Operator:* Are you ready now?  
*Customer:* I'd like a cab for 2:30 p.m., please.  
*Operator:* We'll get a car to you as close to the time as we can.  
*Customer:* Thank you.

## Topics, turns and speakers in casual conversation

In casual conversation, turn taking is a trickier affair, particularly in social situations where the participants don't know each other well. While not exactly a blood sport, casual conversation contains many competitive elements and involves constantly monitoring the input of the other participants, and making strategic decisions about how to fit one's own contribution into the ongoing topic of the conversation, as well as diverting, subverting and even changing the topic of conversation completely.

The following conversation took place among clerical staff in the coffee room of a medical records office. The topic, what one would do if one won the lottery, was stimulated by a television program shown the previous evening, in which someone had won a great deal of money. The text is particularly interesting in terms of topic selection and change and speaker selection and change.

- Gary: If I won the Lotto, I'd buy six or seven catamarans up at Noosa [a beach resort] and sit them on the beach and hire them out and just rest there all the time. (Everyone laughs)
- Pauline: Oh yes and then you – you'd want something to do.
- Gary: Yes, you would but . . .
- Bronwyn: Mm no, look, even if I'd won the Lotto, I'd still have to come to work – I couldn't stand it.
- Gary: No, that's right.
- Bronwyn: I couldn't stand it.
- Pauline: Yes, I think that um . . .
- Pat: I'd buy my farm.
- Bronwyn: I'd still – no, I need contact with people.
- Pauline: Yes, that's right – I think I'd probably – if I'd paid off all my debts and wouldn't have that on my mind – I'd feel better – um but then I'd think I would like to work part time.
- Bronwyn: Mm.
- Gary: Mm.
- Pauline: You know, just for . . .
- Gary: Oh, I – I don't know.
- Pauline: Being able to do things and then you'd still kind of . . .
- Gary: I think I'd use the money a bit in investment.

(Economou, 1986: 106)

In the extract, there is a considerable amount of competition between the speakers for 'airplay'. While the overall theme remains 'what I'd do if I won the lottery', each wants to provide his or her own special angle on the topic. Interestingly, all turns occur through self-selection – there are no instances of the individual currently holding the floor giving it up willingly to one of the other participants. Despite this, the interaction proceeds smoothly, with no overlaps, and only four interruptions.

At the beginning of the extract, Pauline adds to Gary's initial contribution. However, when Gary seeks to continue the exchange, Bronwyn cuts him off, and interpolates her own perspective, which she relates to Pauline's sub-theme of boredom. Her *no, look* is a discourse marker indicating that she is going either to contradict or to change the perspective on the topic. Gary's *No, that's*

*right* is a form of back-channeling, letting Bronwyn know she is being listened to. Pauline tries to get the floor back with her *Yes, I think that um . . .* However, she loses the floor to Pat. By saying *I'd buy my farm*, rather than *I'd buy a farm* (using a possessive adjective rather than indefinite article), it is clear that Pat has talked about this dream to her colleagues before. It is part of the shared knowledge of the group. Bronwyn tries to reinstate her own sub-theme of needing contact with people, and the fact that she would continue working regardless of whether or not she needed the money (note, again, the discourse marker *no*). Pauline agrees, but turns the sub-theme back to her own perspective. Bronwyn and Gary murmur assent, but then Gary decides to dissent. He takes over the agenda, despite Pauline's bids to maintain her turn, and then caps the exchange by returning to the theme that he initiated at the beginning – that he would use the money to invest in a boat rental business in the surfing resort of Noosa. Does Gary's dominance in setting the conversational agenda and then reasserting his perspective at the end (as well as the fact that three of the four interruptions are by him) reflect a gender difference? Some discourse analysts would certainly argue that it does. Male–female differences in conversation are something that we will look at in detail later in the chapter.

What happens when one conversational partner misunderstands or misinterprets the overall functional intention of the other? Consider the following exchange.

- A: I've been smoking for 28 years and I gave up so I could travel up here.  
 B: Sorry?  
 A: I said, I've been smoking for 28 years and I gave up so I could travel up here.  
 B: So?  
 A: So, I gave up smoking.  
 B: What do you want?  
 A: I don't want anything. You know, you're the rudest person I've ever met.

This conversation took place between an elderly male airline passenger (A) and a young female flight attendant (B). The context was the upper deck of a Cathay Pacific 747 aircraft in the days when smoking was still allowed on the lower deck, but not on the upper deck. The miscommunication occurs because the passenger attempts to initiate a social, or interpersonal, conversation. (Basically, he is fishing for a compliment.) Because of her job, however, the flight attendant is cued to assume that passenger-initiated interactions are transactional. They only speak to you when they want something. In this case, the passenger didn't want his glass of champagne replenished; he wanted a pat on the back. When the flight attendant misinterpreted the functional intention of his conversational gambit, he reacted negatively. In fact, he got downright grumpy. This and several of the other conversations in this book illustrate ways in which conversations can come 'unstuck' when interlocutors violate one or more maxims of the cooperative principle – 'be true', 'be brief', 'be relevant', 'be clear' (Grice, 1975).

## Negotiating and co-constructing meaning

As the conversational extracts we have analyzed demonstrate, meanings do not come ready-made. Conversations can be hard work, and conversational

participants have to negotiate with each other to ensure that misunderstandings are either pre-empted or quickly sorted out, as they are in the following fragments.

- A: How do I get to Kensington Road?  
B: Well, you go down Fullarton Road . . .  
A: . . . What down Old Belair and around . . .?  
B: Yeah, and then you go straight . . .  
A: . . . past the hospital?  
B: Yeah, keep going straight, past the racecourse to the roundabout. You know the big roundabout?  
A: Yeah.  
B: And Kensington Road's off to the right.  
A: What, off the roundabout?  
B: Yeah.  
A: Right.

And the following:

- A: So what would you suggest?  
B: About?  
A: You know . . .  
B: . . . Chasing after Lucy?  
A: Well, I wouldn't . . .  
B: That's my advice.  
A: What?  
B: I wouldn't.  
A: Wouldn't what?  
B: I wouldn't do a line for Lucy.

This interactional 'work' carried out by speakers and listeners to ensure that conversations flow smoothly is such a natural part of everyday life that we rarely even notice that we are doing it. It's a bit like driving to work on automatic pilot and, on reaching the office, not being able to recall a single aspect of the drive because our mind was on other things.

Here are some further examples of three important strategies for negotiating meaning and keeping the conversation on track: comprehension checks, confirmation checks and clarification requests.

- A: You gotta tie that thing up under there – know what I mean?  
B: Yeah.

(A's *know what I mean?* is a comprehension check, a strategy designed to check that the listener has understood correctly.)

- A: I saw your girlfriend talking to Steve last night.  
B: My girlfriend?  
A: Yeah, your girlfriend. I didn't know they knew each other.  
B: Neither did I!

(Here, B's *My girlfriend?* serves as a confirmation check to determine that he has understood A correctly. It is thus a listener's strategy, which serves a similar function to the speaker's comprehension check.)

A: Can you pass me the Phillips head?

B: The what?

A: The screwdriver there on the table.

(Here, *The what?* is a request by B for A to reformulate his message more explicitly. In other words, it is a clarification request.)

The following workplace conversation between a supervisor and a worker contains a number of these conversational devices. Note that there are several errors in A's side of the conversation, because he is an immigrant and a second language speaker. The conversation is interesting from an intercultural perspective because he is also the supervisor, an unusual position for an immigrant to be in at the time the conversation was recorded.

A: Now, uh, how do you call the . . . that special paper that fit [*sic*] in the sliding door?

B: In the sliding door?

A: Yeah, you know, the . . .

B: Oh, ceraphic gla.

A: Ceraphic gla . . . they have another name. That's not Clark?

B: No, this one isn't, no.

A: No. Uh, these ones to put to install there before the third of April, meaning the Clark product.

B: Which Mort Adams is taking?

A: Mort Adams is working on it.

B: OK.

A: Mort, Mort Adams told me that he is not sure about it if he have the material or not yet. He will let me know tomorrow.

Several times we have seen that potential or actual miscommunication, far from being an aberration, is the norm in conversational encounters. We have also seen that this miscommunication has several sources: It can be cross-cultural, it can stem from imprecision or ambiguity on the part of the speaker, or it can result from an overall misapprehension of what the other person is on about – as in the case of the airline passenger and flight attendant. It can also be intentional, as is the case in the following interaction.

Henry: I have two tickets for the theater tonight.

Matilda: Good for you. What are you going to see?

Henry: *Measure for Measure*.

Matilda: Interesting play. Hope you enjoy it.

Henry: Oh, so you're busy tonight.

In this example, which I have borrowed from Widdowson (1983), Henry initiates the conversation with what eventually turns out to be an invitation. Matilda, however, chooses to interpret it as a casual observation. For Henry, this is a transactional encounter, but Matilda interprets (or chooses to interpret)

it as an interpersonal interaction. Henry's indirectness is a face-saving device. However, it backfires when Matilda chooses to interpret it literally.

## Speech acts

So far, I have talked about the things we do with language, that is, the communicative functions we perform through language, in extremely general terms, characterizing entire conversations as being basically transactional or interpersonal in nature. Now I want to do a more fine-grained analysis, looking at the functions being performed by individual utterances inside a conversation. The technical term that linguists use for functions at this level is 'speech act'. Speech acts are so interesting, and so complex, that I could have devoted the entire book to them (as, indeed, some linguists have done).

I want to begin the discussion by returning to the conversation between Matilda and Henry in the preceding section. The miscommunication in this brief exchange occurs at the level of the speech act. Henry intended the speech act as an invitation, whereas Matilda interpreted it as an observation.

Henry's opening gambit is an example of an indirect speech act. It is not immediately apparent in the way the utterance is formulated that Henry is inviting Matilda to the play. Why is Henry indirect when he could have avoided all ambiguity by saying something like *I want you to come to Measure for Measure with me* or *How about coming to Measure for Measure?* Henry's indirectness has to do with saving face. A direct invitation is risky for Henry because he faces a direct rejection. It is also risky for Matilda, because she is placed in the position, potentially, of having to say *no*. Issuing an indirect request allows for face saving on both parts (although indirectness also carries a risk for Henry; that of not actually getting what he wants – which, presumably, is Matilda).

In her research into indirectness in conversation, Thomas (1995) argues that indirectness is risky because the potential for failure is high but that it is also costly in that an indirect utterance takes longer for the speaker to produce and longer for the listener to process. She illustrates the risk on indirectness with the following two examples:

### Example 1

*B (a non-native speaker of English)* has been staying with A for several weeks. He has a passion for *West Side Story* and has just played the film's sound track through for the second time in one evening.

A: Would you like to hear something else now?

B: No.

In order to avoid making a direct complaint to his guest, which could hurt his feelings, A suggests indirectly that he has had enough of *West Side Story*. However, his strategy fails; B interprets A's utterance as a genuine question and prepares to play the record for the third time.

### Example 2

An American woman was visiting Israel; one evening she went to the flat of some friends and her host asked her what she would like to drink. She replied: 'Well, I've been on whisky all day.'

The American woman intended to indicate indirectly that, having been drinking whisky previously, she would prefer to stick with whisky. Unfortunately, the host misinterpreted her indirectness and thought she was saying that, as she had been on whisky all day, she didn't want any more to drink.

(Thomas, 1995: 120–121)

According to Thomas, indirectness is a variable quality in conversation. The degree of directness or indirectness will be governed by four factors:

- the relative power of the speaker over the hearer;
- the social distance between the speaker and the hearer;
- the degree to which X is rated as an imposition in culture Y;
- relative rights and obligations between the speaker and the hearer.

Speech acts were first written about by the linguistic philosopher John Austin (1962), who pointed out that certain utterances are not meant to convey information at all but to perform an action of some kind. When a member of the clergy or a registered marriage celebrant utters the words *I now pronounce you man and wife*, she is not making a propositional statement but is performing an act. The same is true for:

I name this boat the *Bonnie Bess*.  
 I promise to pay you back tomorrow.  
 I apologize for my transgressions.

Because they don't state a proposition, these performatives have no 'truth' value. It therefore makes no sense to evaluate them in terms of whether they are true or false. *No you don't* would be as inappropriate a response to *I now pronounce you man and wife* as it would be to an utterance such as *I name this boat the Bonnie Bess*.

Another philosopher, John Searle, building on the work of Austin, set out to develop a taxonomy of speech acts. Searle identified five basic speech act types:

*Directives*: The speaker tries to get the hearer to do something, e.g. *ask, challenge, command, insist, request*. The directive may be direct ('Stack the chairs along the wall') or indirect ('Hmm, my glass appears to be empty').

*Commissives*: The speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to a certain course of action or refusing to act, e.g. *guarantee, pledge, promise, swear, vow*. As with directives, they vary in directness and strength.

*Representatives*: The speaker is committed, in varying degrees, to the truth of a proposition, e.g. *affirm, believe, conclude, deny, report*. Representatives can be evaluated for their truth value. They may vary in terms of how hedged they are. "Darwin was partially correct" is, obviously, not as strong a statement as "Darwin was right" or "Darwin was wrong" (Hatch, 1992: 127).

*Declaratives (also called performatives)*: The speaker alters the external status or condition of an object or situation solely by making the utterance,

e.g. *I resign, I baptize you, You're fired, Class dismissed, War is hereby declared.* Obviously the person uttering the directive must be empowered to do so.

*Expressives:* The speaker expresses an attitude about a state of affairs, e.g. *apologize, deplore, congratulate, thank, welcome.* Expressives include compliments, statements of joy and disappointment and expressions of likes and dislikes.

(Searle, 1969; Hatch, 1992)

As we have already seen, indirect speech acts are common in everyday conversation. In fact, certain speech acts such as directives and invitations are almost always expressed indirectly: invitations in order to save face, and directives in order to soften the abruptness of the directive. Think of all the ways in which the directive *Give me some more wine* could be expressed indirectly.

Could you give me a little wine, please?  
 Would you mind passing me the wine bottle?  
 That's an interesting looking bottle.  
 Hmm, my glass appears to be empty again.  
 This cheese would go well with a little of that wine.  
 Is that the delicious Chilean cabernet you were talking about?

An extreme example of indirectness was provided to me by a friend who lives in Japan. His daughter had been practicing the piano, as she did most afternoons, when there was a knock on the door. He opened the door to find his elderly neighbor standing there.

'Your daughter plays the piano beautifully,' she said.

'Thank you very much,' replied my friend.

Several days later he received an official letter from the management office requesting that his daughter curtail her piano practice. The old woman had been complaining about the noise, not praising his daughter.

Speech act theorists generally distinguish between three different dimensions or orientations to an utterance. The first is the literal or propositional meaning. Taken at face value, *That's an interesting looking bottle* is simply a comment about a bottle. This is known as the locutionary aspect of the utterance. The next dimension is the effect that the speaker intended the utterance to have on the listener. This is the illocutionary force of the utterance. The third dimension is the actual effect that the utterance has on the listener, which is called the perlocutionary effect. If the illocutionary force of the utterance was to get the listener to replenish the speaker's glass, and he does so, then the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect are one and the same. However, they may not coincide. The hearer may decide that the speaker has had enough, and reply *Yes, it is, isn't it? I quite like wines from lesser known vineyards. I'm about to have a cup of tea. Would you like one?*

The following (presumably invented) examples, provided by Hatch (1992), illustrate the mismatch between speaker intention and listener interpretation when it comes to directives issued indirectly.

A: How many times do I have to tell you?

B: Five times.



A: We need this photocopied for the 4 o'clock meeting.

B: That's true.

A: Let's give Heidi a call three times a day.

B: Yes, please do.

A: Could you do the dishes?

B: Yes, I could.

A: Where are the matches?

B: In the matchbox.

A: What happened to the salt?

B: Nothing happened to the salt.

A: Is Pattilee there?

B: Yes, she is.

A: How would it look if you were to arrive late?

B: It would look beautiful.

Like all other aspects of communication, degree of directness will be driven by contextual factors. If you are clinging by your fingertips to the edge of a precipice, you are more likely to shout *Throw me the rope* than *I say, old chap, if you're not frightfully busy right now, would you be so awfully kind as to throw me the rope?*

Familiarity with the other person will also be an important factor, as the following anecdote from Hatch (1992: 123) attests:

A colleague (not a personal friend) at another university sent me a request to collect some comparison data for him. Our universities were in different countries, and the request came at the end of the academic year when all professors are overloaded with work and the students from whom I would need to collect the data were preparing for final exams. Therefore, the ability and willingness of the addressee (me) to carry out the request was definitely in doubt. I was physically distant from the requester, but I was asked to do an action in my own territory. Yet, the request was stated in terms of imperatives: 'Follow the directions . . .' 'Return no later than . . .' This colleague was a native speaker of English. My reaction was, 'Well, of all the nerve!'

Determining the status of speech acts, even direct speech acts, can often be problematic. Following a highly disruptive strike by staff during peak holiday travel time, former British Airways chief Sir Rod Eddington stated that he 'would like to apologize'. However, his statement did not cut much ice with one inconvenienced and obviously disgruntled journalist. Writing in the *Financial Times* (July 30, 2003), Michael Skapinker argued that the utterance 'I would like to apologize' no more constitutes an apology than 'I would like to lose weight' constitutes weight loss. In order to interpret the speech act, however, we need to know what the modal *would like to* is doing. Is it expressing a wish (*I wish I could apologize, I wish I could lose weight*), or is it used as a polite form of *will*? Skapinker clearly prefers the former interpretation, although the

latter is also clearly a possibility. Does *I would like to congratulate the winner* constitute a congratulation or a wish? Is the speaker saying *I wish I could congratulate the winner* or *I congratulate the winner*? Either interpretation is a possibility, although most winners would, I think, prefer to interpret the utterance as a congratulation than a wish.

## Language and gender

Once feminism began to have an impact on the way we looked at male–female relationships, it was not too long before academics began to view language through a radically different lens. Feminism dramatically altered the ways in which we looked at social and cultural phenomena, and language was no exception. One of the first items to be put under the feminist microscope was the ubiquitous male pronoun ‘he’ used as a generic reference for both men and woman (and also for God, for that matter, much to the displeasure of many feminists), a practice deemed sexist when used to refer to women. This criticism led to the adoption of clumsy devices such as the inclusion of both pronouns *he* or *she*, *he/she* and *s/he*. Some writers even used a form of reverse sexist discrimination by embracing the female form *she* as the default pronoun reference item for both men and women. Other generic terms with a male bias were also subjected to linguistic revisionism. Thus, *chairmen* became *chairpersons*, and *waiters* became *waitpersons*.

Gender differences in language become really interesting when we look at the different conversational styles of men and women. You may not be surprised to learn that in conversation men talk more than women, they interrupt more, and they talk about themselves more than women do. Less commonly known is that, contrary to popular wisdom, there is evidence to suggest that men gossip more than women.

Robin Lakoff (1975), one of the first linguists to investigate gender differences in spoken language, suggested that women’s language contains linguistic features that show they are excessively polite, uncertain and deferential. Such features include:

*Tag questions*: questions tagged onto an utterance such as *don’t we?* or *haven’t you?* which are sometimes used to gain approval or confirmation.

*Rising intonation*: used to turn a statement into a question, so weakening the force of it.

*Super-polite forms*: excessive use of direct speech acts in favor of indirect speech acts marked by modals.

*Hedges and fillers*: expressions such as *kind of* make assertions more tentative.

*Expletives*: women use fewer expletives than men.

Another linguist who has investigated gender differences is Deborah Tannen, whose research into the speech styles of men and women has been turned into several bestselling paperbacks including *That’s Not What I Meant* and *You Just Don’t Understand*. Tannen is careful to point out that, while conversational styles between men and women differ, one is not necessarily superior to the other (although most of the anecdotes in her books imply otherwise!). Here is one of them.

I was at a dinner with faculty members from other departments in my university. To my right was a woman. As the dinner began, we introduced ourselves. After we told each other what department we were in and what subjects we taught, she asked what my research was about. We talked about my research for a little while. Then I asked her about her research and she told me about it. Finally, we discussed the ways that our research overlapped. Later, as tends to happen at dinners, we branched out to others at the table. I asked a man across the table from me what department he was in and what he did. During the next half hour, I learned a lot about his job, his research, and his background. Shortly before the dinner ended there was a lull, and he asked me what I did. When I told him I was a linguist, he became excited and told me about a research project he had conducted that was related to neurolinguistics. He was still telling me about his research when we all got up to leave the table.

(Tannen, 1991: 126)

Tannen uses the anecdote to support her claims about gender differences in conversation. She says that, when she tells other women about her research into language and gender, they offer their own experiences to support the patterns she describes. She finds this flattering because it puts her center stage without her having to grab the spotlight. Men, on the other hand, tend either to give her a lecture on language, challenge her on her research finding, or change the subject to something they know more about.

Since the early work of Lakoff, Tannen and others, researchers have broadened the scope of research into language and gender, looking at how language, rather than reflecting social reality, plays an active role in the construction of social reality and identity. Stokoe (2003), for instance, looks at how women are positioned in neighborhood disputes. In the following extract from a discussion between two men about a dispute involving a female neighbor, one of the men states:

she's a bully (0.5) that's the best word a bully (.) and she's a foul mouthed woman (.) she got nothing going for her as far as I'm concerned (.) she wants to get herself sorted out.

(Stokoe, 2003: 337)

Nelson (2010) examines how people in same sex relationships can have their sexual orientation, and therefore identity, denied through language. In a written assignment when studying Spanish, she was required to answer a series of yes/no questions including 'Did you go to the movies with your boyfriend last night?' When her assignment was returned, she found that the teacher had deducted points for one answer, *No, fui al cine con mi novia anoche*.

The teacher had circled the words 'No' and 'novia', perceiving these to be in error. Where I had written 'No' she wrote 'Si'; where I had written 'novia', she corrected the final 'a' by putting a slash through it and writing an 'o' over it. In other words, she changed my answer from 'No, I went to the movies with my girlfriend' to 'Yes, I went to the movies with my boyfriend.'

(Nelson, 2010: 171)

Some years later, when she thought times had changed, her partner enquired at a language school about languages classes for Nelson and herself. The following conversation ensued.

I want to take a French class and my partner wants to take Italian.  
What level are you?  
Probably Beginner 2.  
And your partner, what's he?  
She's intermediate, I think.  
Well, he will need to be assessed.  
So, can she ring you to do that?  
Yes, just have him call us.  
Right.

(Nelson, 2010: 175)

In a very different kind of investigation, Takahashi (2010) presents a case study of multilingual couple talk. Drawing on her relationship with her Polish-speaking husband, she looks at the way that romance and identity play out in a multilingual relationship. Her study supports Pilar's (2002) conclusion that, in cross-cultural couplehood, identity is not a matter of labels and categories, but an 'act of doing' in which the private language of the couples is embedded in public discourses involving concepts of gender, nationality, immigration and international marriage.

### **Linguistic connectivity in spoken discourse**

In this final section, I would like to illustrate how the different linguistic features that have been discussed work together to create coherent discourse. Some of these features are also extremely important in written discourse.

The following is a slightly edited extract from a piece of conversational discourse. Read the extract and see how many discourse features you can identify. The conversation took place between two good friends. One of the friends owns an Apple iPod. The other had just purchased one, and was trying to figure out how to load songs from his computer to the iPod. The conversation took place in the latter's home office one wet Sunday afternoon. The two friends were filling in time while waiting for a third friend to collect them to go to a movie, and B had suggested to A that they kill time by loading A's new iPod.

The extract, which is typical of many conversations of this kind, shows how formal features of language, particularly cohesion, clefting, thematization, and the negotiation of meaning, function to enable the interaction to proceed smoothly. It also illustrates the intimate connection between discourse and the context that gave rise to it in the first place.

As you read the extract, see how many conversational features you can identify. (My own summary follows the extract.)

- 1 A: This is *so* frustrating. Look, I'm clicking here but nothing's happening.
- 2 B: Here, did you say?
- 3 A: Uhuh. But nothing's happening.
- 4 B: It says here 'Insert a CD into your computer.'
- 5 A: I did – this one here. What I did was put the CD in and . . .
- 6 B: Did you put it in before you opened iTunes?

- 7 A: Yes, I did. iTunes is supposed to open automatically.  
 8 B: But it . . .  
 9 A: . . . didn't. I had to open it myself. And now I can't import. So . . .  
 10 B: You say you tried to import.  
 11 A: Uhuh. Look. I'm clicking here and nothing's happening.  
 12 B: Oh, but it's here that you're supposed to click.  
 13 A: Where?  
 14 B: Here. Look, let me do it.  
 15 A: Oh wow. It's working. I feel such an idiot. Thanks a lot!  
 16 B: For making you look like an idiot?  
 17 A: No, silly! For helping me.  
 18 B: That's OK. You should've asked me earlier.  
 19 A: Well, I was going to, but you use a Mac.

Here is a line-by-line analysis of some of the linguistic features to be found in the extract. In keeping with the theme of the book, I have highlighted those features that have a 'discourse implication'. That is, I have documented those features that help to create a sense of coherence, and that can only be fully understood and explicated with reference to the broader linguistic and experiential contexts in which they are found.

*Line 1*

The words *this* and *here* are referring or 'pointing' to things in the experiential world outside of the text. The general term for such 'pointing' words and expressions is deixis (from the Greek word *deixis*, which means 'pointing'). The technical term for words that point outside the text is 'exophoric reference'.

*Line 2*

Exophoric reference: deixis – *here*

Thematization: Fronting *here*

Negotiation of meaning: confirmation check: The function of the utterance is for B to check that she has understood correctly.

*Line 3*

'I did put it in here . . .' is not repeated by the speaker because it is assumed to be 'understood' from the context. This is an example of ellipsis.

Conjunction: *but*

*Line 4*

*It*

*here*

*Line 5*

*Did* is an example of verbal substitution: *did* is substituted for *Insert a CD into your computer*.

Exophoric reference, deixis: *this*, *here*

Nominal substitution: *one*

Thematization/topicalization: *What I did* . . .

Ellipsis: *in* (the computer)

Lexical repetition or reiteration: *CD*

*Line 6*

Exophoric reference: *you, you*

Reference: *it*

Ellipsis: *in* (the computer)

Conjunction: *before*

Lexical reiteration and collocation: *iTunes*

*Line 7*

Verbal substitution: *did*

Lexical reiteration and collocation: *iTunes*

*Line 8*

Cohesive reference: *it*

Conjunction: *But it . . .*

Conversational latching: *But it . . .*

*Line 9*

Latching: . . . *didn't*

Reference: *I, it, I, myself*

Conjunction: *And, now, so*

Ellipsis: *can't import*

Latching: *So . . .*

*Line 10*

Confirmation check: *You say you tried to import*

Reference: *you, you*

Lexical reiteration: *import*

*Line 11*

Adjacency pair (confirming request): *Uhuh*

Discourse marker: *Look*

Reference: *I*

Lexical reiteration: *clicking*

Reference: *here*

Conjunction: *and*

*Line 12*

Discourse marker: *Oh*

Clefting: . . . *it's here that . . .*

Conjunction: *but*

Reference: *you*

Lexical reiteration: *click*

*Line 13*

Ellipsis: *Where [am I supposed to check]?*

*Line 14*

Deixis: *Here*

Discourse marker: *Look*

Reference: *me, it*

Verbal substitution: *do*

*Line 15*

Discourse marker: *Oh wow*

Reference: *It, I*

Adjacency pair – first part: *Thanks a lot!*

*Line 16*

Insertion sequence – first part: *For making you look like an idiot?*

Lexical reiteration: *idiot*

*Line 17*

Insertion sequence – second part: *No, silly! For helping me*

Reference: *me*

Lexical collocation: *silly*

*Line 18*

Adjacency pair – second part: *That's OK*

Reference: *that, you, me*

Comparative reference/ellipsis: *earlier*

*Line 19*

Discourse marker: *Well*

Reference: *I, you*

Ellipsis: *going to [ask you earlier]*

Conjunction: *but*

Lexical collocation: *Mac*

From this analysis, you can see how intricately patterned spoken language is. The extract also shows how intimately conversation is connected to the world outside the text – to the entities, processes, personal relationships, events and so on that give rise to the conversation in the first place. In short, it illustrates Thornbury and Slade's (2006: 25) characterization of conversation as: 'the informal, interactive talk between two or more people, which happens in real time, is spontaneous, has a largely interpersonal function and in which participants share symmetrical rights'.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have explored ways in which the three sub-systems of sounds, words and grammar work together to enable spoken communication to take place. We have just seen how even mundane pronouns such as *he, she, her* and *him* become exciting, even controversial, subjects of investigation when studied as tools for communication in authentic interactions. We have seen that in such interactions all elements within the linguistic systems can become instruments of power, oppression and liberation.

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# LEARNER NARRATIVES IN RESEARCH AND TEACHING

This chapter is a slightly revised and updated version of an invited presentation at the Alliant International University, San Diego. In the first part of the chapter, I look at the use of language learning histories as a research genre. Although the use of narratives as a research tool has a long history in general education (Denny, 1978; Bruner, 1985, 1987), it has only recently gained momentum in language teaching (Benson and Nunan, 2005). The chapter will look at the emergence of narrative as a research genre in the context of learner-centered curriculum development, as well as at the use of learners' stories in pedagogy and research. In the second part of the chapter, I will illustrate the use of narrative as a research tool with reference to a large-scale, longitudinal study that was carried out at the University of Hong Kong.

Invited presentation, Alliant International University, San Diego, California, 2005.

### Narrative as a research tradition

Stories touch the human heart as well as the mind. From time immemorial they have provided a vehicle for entertainment, but more importantly in pre- and non-literature societies for passing cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Bruner (1985, 1987, 2006) has argued that narrative represents 'one of two irreducible modes of cognitive functioning – or, more simply, two modes of thought'.

He goes on to suggest that:

. . . narrative is concerned with the explication of human intentions in the context of action . . . there is a highly constrained deep structure to narrative, analogous, say, to the deep structure of grammar, and that good stories are well-formed surface realizations of this underlying structure.

(Bruner, 2006: 118)

The powerful effect of narrative is clearly evident in a review of the harrowing film *United 93*, a narrative reconstruction of the hijacking and subsequent

destruction of United Airlines flight 93 on September 11, 2001. The author of the review, Helen Garner, writes:

I have a rule of thumb for judging the value of a piece of art. Does it give me energy, or take energy away? When I staggered out of *United 93*, this rule had lost traction. I realised I had spent most of the screening crouching forward half out of my seat, with my hand clamped around my jaw. Something in me had been violently shifted off centre. . . . I'm [left with] the same old haunting question: why do stories matter so terribly to us that we will offer ourselves up to, and later be grateful for, an experience that we know is going to fill us with grief and despair?

(Garner, 2006)

My own interest in the use of learner narratives, both as a research tool and as a means of providing learner input into curriculum development, grew out of applied research I carried out in the 1980s. This work aimed to place learners at the center of the curriculum development process. As communicative language teaching found its way into the classroom in the form of pair and group work, role plays, simulations and the like, interest grew in what learners had to make of these new techniques. This led to a series of investigations into the attitudes of teachers and learners towards what happens in the classroom. This research was funded by the National Curriculum Development Centre for the Australian Adult Immigrant Education Program. A full account of these studies can be found in Nunan (1988). (See also Brindley, 1984.)

Rubin and Thompson (1982) used interviews and learner narratives to investigate the characteristics of the 'good' language learner. Despite a diversity of approaches and preferences, they were able to identify a number of characteristics that indicated a degree of autonomy in the approaches of good learners. They found, for example, that good learners found their own way, were creative and experimented with language, and found opportunities for activating their language outside of the classroom.

In a subsequent study into the 'good' language learner, Nunan (1991) collected learning histories from 44 learners who had attained bilingual competence in foreign language contexts. The research focused in particular on what informants found most helpful and what they found least helpful in learning English as a foreign language. Despite some diversity, the responses were surprisingly homogeneous. Least helpful were teacher-centered lessons focused on grammar. Most helpful were exposure to authentic data, interactions with native speakers and opportunities to activate language outside the classroom (Nunan, 1991).

This research underlined the importance of incorporating learners' views on the nature of language learning and teaching into the curriculum planning and implementation process. The only way to do that was to provide space for the students to tell their own stories. By collecting data directly from learners themselves it became clear that learning processes are complex, organic and inherently unstable, that there is considerable diversity in the beliefs and attitudes of individual learners and that teaching is less about transmitting information than about creating contexts and opportunities for learners to find their own best ways.

From this early work which involved learners as collaborators and informants rather than 'subjects', interest grew in the use of learner narratives and biogra-

phies as research tools. Narratives or (auto)biographies focus on the description and analysis of social phenomena as they are experienced within the context of individual lives. Benson (2005: 21) coined the term '(auto)biography' to indicate that, 'in the context of second language learning research, the data are as a rule first-person (autobiographical) accounts of experience that are analysed either by the subject of the research (autobiographically) or by another researcher (biographically)'.

Chik (2004: 5) argues that the biographical approach puts people at the center of the research process, providing a means by which researchers can facilitate an individual's recreation of their past, present and future from an insider's perspective. According to Chik, 'The particular advantage of this method is the empowerment of the interviewees through highlighting the most important aspects of their life history.'

Until recently, the use of narrative, (auto)biography or 'storytelling' has been overlooked in language learning research. However, it has a considerable, if somewhat controversial, history in general education research. Denny, one of the early proponents of the approach, champions its use in the following way:

Storytelling is an attempt to employ ancient conceptualizations . . . focused on directly observable referents. We now have Newtonians in educational research – no Einsteins – carrying on 4th decimal place ethnography before getting the rudimentary realities in place. This much I propose for general agreement: without good documentation, good storytelling, we'll never get good educational theory, which we desperately need. . . . I claim story telling can contribute to our understanding of problems in education and teachers can help. Folks are forever calling for and proposing nifty solutions to problems never understood. Storytelling is unlikely to help in the creation or evaluation of educational remedies, but can facilitate problem definition. Problem definition compared to problem solving in an underdeveloped field in education.

(Denny, 1978: 3)

Goodson and Walker also emphasize the essentially practical nature of storytelling in educational research:

Storytelling seems to offer a kind of intermediate technology of research adapted to the study of practical problems in realistic time scales without the prospect of ten years' initiation among dwindling (and probably best left) tribes of Primitives.

(Goodson and Walker, 1982: 29)

Stories provide insights into the human condition that can only be glimpsed in the rear view mirror of regular research. Lawrence Stenhouse, one of the founders of qualitative approaches to curriculum research and development, suggested that even fictionalized accounts can carry greater force than quantitative research. In the following extract, he draws a contrast between quantitative survey research and fiction:

There is a need to capture in the presentation of the research the texture of reality which makes judgment possible for an audience. This cannot

be achieved in the reduced, attenuated accounts of events which support quantification. The contrast is between the breakdown of questionnaire responses of 472 married women respondents who have had affairs with men other than their husbands and the novel *Madam Bovary*. The novel relies heavily on that appeal to judgment which is appraisal of credibility in the light of the reader's experience. You cannot base much appeal to judgment on the statistics of survey; the portrayal relies almost entirely upon appeal to judgment.

(Stenhouse, 1982: 24)

Bell (2002) points out that narrative research is based on the human need to impose meaning on what might otherwise be perceived as random experiences, and that we do this by imposing a story line on these experiences. However, she makes the telling point that narrative inquiry is more than just telling stories. The narrative is the starting point. However, for the researcher, it is the point of departure rather than the destination. The researcher draws on the narrative to generate insights and assumptions about constructs and phenomena (such as motivation, identity and anxiety) that are illustrated by the story. She goes on to point out that:

Narrative inquiry involves working with people's consciously told stories, recognizing that these rest on deeper stories of which people are often unaware. Participants construct stories that support their interpretation of themselves, excluding experiences and events that undermine the identities they currently claim. Whether or not they believe the stories they tell is relatively unimportant because the inquiry goes beyond the specific stories to explore the assumptions inherent in the shaping of those stories.

(Bell, 2002: 209)

Pavlenko (2002) draws a distinction between Bell's approach and her own, which she calls narrative study. She suggests that, while narrative inquiry represents an ethnographic approach to eliciting understanding, narrative study focuses on narrative construction from a variety of perspectives. She points out that narratives are highly specific to biographical variables such as race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, and that the audience for whom the narrative is constructed will also influence what gets told. Rather than viewing any given narrative account as a factual statement of past events, it is important to look behind the narrative and to 'examine whose stories are being heard and why, and whose stories are still missing, being misunderstood, or being misinterpreted' (Pavlenko, 2002: 216).

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) suggest that narrative research

... refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters). It can be the object of the research or a means for the study of another question. It may be used for comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality.

(Lieblich et al., 1998: 2-3)

In this section, we have seen that, while narrative inquiry is a healthy research tradition going back many years, in recent years it has attracted the attention of researchers in applied linguistics and language education. Narratives enable people to construct a meaningful story about themselves over time.

The opportunity for learners to tell their own stories, and the control that they have over those stories, is empowering. It changes the learner's role within the research process. Learners are no longer individuals who have research done to them. They are collaborators in an ongoing, interpretive process.

## **The study**

### **Background**

In the first part of this paper, I sought to locate the emergence of narrative as a research tool within the context of a learner-centered approach to curriculum research and development. This was meant to be something more than a conventional literature review, although I hope that it provides a context for the rest of the paper in which I describe a longitudinal investigation based on learner narratives that was carried out by the authors at the University of Hong Kong.

This research built on the work of Benson and Lor (1999). It aimed to look in detail at how learners conceptualize language and the language learning process. It also sought insights into how those perceptions change, and into what it is that triggers such change. The study was a naturalistic, hypothesis-generating one involving 59 first year undergraduate students from the Arts and Science faculties at the University of Hong Kong. Data were collected through structured interviews, which resulted in a series of language learning histories. Students also completed the SILL learning strategies inventory (Oxford, 1990).

The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the students' first language. Thirty-three of these were translated into English. The selection was made by the research assistants, who rejected recordings for several reasons including poor sound quality, non-completion of the interview or uncooperative interviewees. While we made no attempt to arrive at a statistically valid stratified sample, we felt comfortable that the 33 transcribed interviews were broadly representative of students in the Arts and Science faculties in terms of gender, language proficiency, and learning strategy orientations.

The overall principle governing the design of the interviews was that interviewees be encouraged to speak freely and provide as much data on their experiences as possible. Cantonese was selected for two main reasons. Firstly, we felt that students would produce more data if they spoke in their first language. Secondly, we felt that they would speak more freely about their experiences to interviewers who were relatively close to them in age and experience. (Both interviewers were relatively recent graduates from the University of Hong Kong.)

The choice of the language to use in research of this kind raises complex issues that are rarely discussed in the literature. While the decision to interview in Cantonese ruled out opportunities for discourse analysis, this loss was more than compensated for by the quality of the substantive data we obtained.

The overall aim of the interviews was to guide interviewees through a process of reconstructing their experience of learning English. What we wanted was the story of an 'English language learning career'. This led to a basic model for the

interview in which the interviewees were prompted to describe their experiences of learning English at a particular stage of their lives and what they thought English and learning English 'were like' at that time. The interview concluded with several questions about current attitudes and approaches to English.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were translated and transcribed. Once we had the transcribed interviews, which ran to several hundred pages, we had to decide what to do with them, as in their raw state the sheer quantity of the data was overwhelming. Our initial approach was based on Kvale's (1996: 192) technique called *meaning condensation*.

*Meaning condensation* entails an abridgement of the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations. Long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words. Meaning condensation thus involves a reduction of large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations and results in condensed narrative histories that are subjected to further analysis. An example of one such condensed narrative can be found in the appendix to this paper.

Procedurally, we drew on Lieblich's holistic-content approach to the analysis of life history data, which has five steps as follows:

- 1 Read the material several times until a pattern emerges. . . . There are aspects of the life story to which you might wish to pay special attention, but their significance depends on the entire story and its contents. Such aspects are, for example, the opening of the story, or evaluations . . . of the parts of the story that appear in the text.
- 2 Put your initial and global impressions of the case into writing.
- 3 Decide on special foci of content or themes that you want to follow in the story as it evolves from beginning to end.
- 4 Using colored markers . . . mark the various themes in the story, reading separately and repeatedly for each one.
- 5 Follow each theme throughout the story and note your conclusion. Be aware of where a theme appears for the first and last times, the transitions between the themes, the context for each one, and their relative salience in the text.

(Lieblich et al., 1998: 62–63)

### **Discussion**

Gloria's narrative account, which I have reproduced in the appendix to the chapter, illustrates one of the outcomes of our work: a fascinating, but puzzling, relationship between the growth of autonomy (that is, our learners' attitudes and approaches to learning) and development of a 'communicative' orientation to language (that is, their conceptualization of language).

We have defined autonomy as the capacity to control one's own learning in terms of management, cognition and content. Management is related to time allocation, making plans, developing one's own learning contracts, etc. The cognitive domain relates to strategies, that is, being selective in terms of input, reflection, using metacognitive knowledge and so on. The final area is that of

content – what it is that learners think that they're learning: is it memorizing a body of knowledge or developing communicative processes?

Autonomy thus implies a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning. Principally, autonomous learners are able to:

- self-determine the overall direction of their learning;
- become actively involved in the management of the learning process;
- exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities.

In this general sense, autonomy has been associated with constructivist and experiential theories of learning. Within the field of language learning, autonomy also implies certain propositions concerning the importance of target language use, and in this sense it has been most closely associated with research that falls under the broad heading of 'communicative language teaching'. Our data suggests that, for language learners themselves, the development of autonomy is often closely associated with the development of a communicative orientation towards the target language.

In making sense of our learners' stories, we came to realize that their current attitudes to, beliefs about and approaches to language learning represented particular moments in their lives as language learners, and that these were contextualized within interpretations of particular experiences of learning particular languages in particular social and educational contexts. Without knowing the context, it was difficult to ascribe deeper significance to the stories. We also found an interesting tension between the ideology of the school system and the evolution of our subjects as learners. The educational system in Hong Kong – at least the one that our students encountered – is predicated very much on a traditional 'transmission' model. In the early years of learning English, this is reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of the learners. However, at about midway through their secondary school, the students begin to report a change in their attitude towards the language they are learning and themselves as learners. They gradually become aware that English is a means of communication. This often takes the form of the realization that English is important to their academic success and future prospects in the world. This realization seems to be quite closely connected to the initiation of self-directed learning strategies. (It is at this point that learners become aware of the opportunities for learning and using English outside of the classroom, and they report reading, listening to songs, watching movies and so on.) One informant reported to us 'You only have to look up to learn English in Hong Kong.' From the data, it seems that there is some kind of developmental process going on, and that self-direction is dependent on a certain conception of learning. So, while the school system remained rooted in a traditional 'transmission' mode that sees the function of education as preserving, adding to and transmitting knowledge and values – in a word, to preserving and transmitting the dominant culture – the students themselves began to adopt an experiential approach to language development.

Although many definitions of autonomy in language learning make little or no reference to the specifics of second language acquisition (see, for example, Holec, 1980), some researchers have attempted to incorporate communicative assumptions within their descriptions of autonomy. Little (1991: 4), for example, argues that the capacity for autonomy presupposes that 'the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of

his learning' and, in a later discussion of second language learning as a 'special case' for autonomy, he argues that:

[I]n order to achieve communicative proficiency learners in formal contexts must be required not simply to practise prefabricated dialogues and role plays, but to use the target language to articulate their own meanings in the fulfilment of communicative purposes that arise naturally in the course of the learning dialogue. The foreign language must be the medium as well as the content of learning.

(Little, 1994: 438)

This implies that the 'psychological relation' to the process and content of learning in question involves, at least in part, a communicative orientation towards the target language and the language learning task. In other words, autonomy in language learning is not merely a matter of control over learning activities and resources. It is also a matter of a particular orientation towards language learning in which, 'for the truly autonomous learner, each occasion of language use is an occasion of language learning, and *vice versa*' (Little, 1997: 99).

As teacher educators, our challenge is to convince teachers that we can learn a great deal from listening to our learners. We have to listen to what they don't say as well as to what they do say. We have to listen to the language they use as well as to the language they don't use. We have to notice the ways in which they transform the language data and learning experiences that we provide for them.

In the concluding chapter to our edited book on learners' stories, Phil Benson and I drew three conclusions based on the studies presented:

- 1 Language learning and attitudes towards language learning are unstable and change over time.

Collecting data from informants over a prolonged period revealed that, as learners accumulated experiences and developed their proficiency, their beliefs and attitudes changed. In other words, difference and diversity existed, not just between learners, but within learners at different stages of their language learning experience.

- 2 Learner difference is a complex construct that cannot be reduced to the influence of isolated variables.

The fact that learners are different and learn in different ways is something of a truism. Our research has demonstrated that learner difference is a complex construct that cannot be reduced to the influence of isolated variables.

- 3 The processes and goals of language learning are intimately interconnected with other aspects of individuals' lives.

This observation follows on from the second. While mainstream approaches to second language acquisition tend to isolate psychological and social variables including motivation, affective factors, age, beliefs, strategies and identity (Ellis, 1994), the line of research presented here indicates that the factors are intimately intertwined, not just with each other, but also with learners' larger life circumstances and goals.

(Benson and Nunan, 2005)



## Further research

As with much qualitative research, this study raises more questions than it answers. Some of the questions that occurred to us as we contested the data we had collected against related research and theory included:

What triggers what? Does the transition from viewing language as a subject to be studied to a view of language as a tool for communication lead to autonomy, or vice versa?

Is a communicative orientation a prerequisite for the development of autonomy?

What insights can we gain from the psychological literature on attention? (As Bialystock, 1990, has noted, unless you can control attention and select and process input, you won't learn much.)

What are the implications of conflict between teacher and learner approaches, beliefs and expectations? (We found an interesting reversal in some of our learner narratives. Rather than teachers seeing language as a tool for communication, and learners seeing it as a body of knowledge to be memorized, it is the learners who, by and large, come to see language as a tool for communication, and teachers as a subject to be studied.)

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the emergence of narrative research within the context of a learner-centered approach to education. This tradition draws on data from and about learners in the form of narratives of learning histories for research and teaching.

In the first part of the paper, I provided a selective account of early work that gave learners a central role in curriculum research and development. I would like to conclude by suggesting that, in addition to systematically collecting, analyzing and reflecting on the spoken and written language our learners produce at different stages in the learning process, we look *behind* the language to the stories they have to tell. Such stories will help us to reconcile the gap that almost inevitably seems to exist between the researcher, the teacher and the learner. It will also provide us with insights into the complex relationships between planning, teaching and learning, a relationship that is neatly captured by Riley:

A blind man has friends who talk to him about the world which they can see but which he cannot. Amongst the things that interest him most are what his friends call 'bubbles'. . . . Intrigued, the blind man asks his friends to make him some bubbles, which they do, but since he cannot see them he is obliged to try to touch them. But not only are they difficult to locate, when he does succeed in finding one, his touch destroys it. For him 'bubbles' will remain a matter of hearsay and a slight sensation of dampness on his fingertips. He simply does not have the appropriate tools for observing or experiencing the objects in question. Do we? That is, if we extrapolate from my analogy to our present area of interest, do we possess the methodological and conceptual tools which are appropriate to the study of autonomy, self-directed learning and self-access? Or are we teachers and researchers in

this field condemned to stumble around like the blind, gesticulating wildly and destroying the very thing we want to understand?

(Riley, 1996: 251)

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## **Appendix: A condensed narrative: the case of Gloria**

I first encountered English in kindergarten. I really don't remember if I ever heard it before then. I remember that the first thing we learned was the alphabet – A,B,C, A is for apple, that kind of thing. It was nothing special, just one more subject. But I didn't think it was a very important subject.

I don't remember whether my primary school was supposed to be Chinese- or English-medium. I don't think it was ever said. All subjects were taught in Chinese, even English. The main focus of the lessons was vocabulary, and simple conversations. *Hello, I'm Gloria. Who are you?* – that sort of thing. I remember that it was pretty boring. We had a book, and had to follow along as the teacher read. Now and then, he'd ask us to spell words. Most of the time in primary school was spent copying stuff out. It didn't matter what the subject was. In English class, the teacher would give you a sentence and tell you to write it out several times.

I had no contact with English at all out of class, unless you consider doing English homework as contact. Extra-curricular activities after school were mainly sports. There was nothing in English.

When I got to years 5 and 6, I still didn't think that English was very important. We prepared for the Academic Aptitude Test, but the emphasis was on Chinese and Mathematics. We didn't have any special preparation for English or extra homework, so I didn't think that it was important. I remember that the focus in class was on grammar – memorizing tenses and that sort of thing.

After primary school, I went to an English-medium secondary school. In the beginning, what that meant was that for many subjects the textbook was in English. In class, the teachers spoke Chinese because their job was to make sure we understood, and the best way to do that was through Chinese.

Although we had a School English Society, my friends and I never thought of joining it on our own initiative. We thought more about what sports we would play when we joined the Sports Club. English wasn't an activity that you could use or have fun with; it was a subject that you had to study and learn.

When I started in high school, I had more contact with English because it was an English-medium school and the teacher more or less had to speak English. Then my view of English began to change. I began to see that, in addition to

being a subject to be studied, it could also be used as a tool to study other subjects. For example, I studied History, and classes were conducted in English, so English became more important. In most classes the teachers used a mixture of Cantonese and English – probably 50–50. There was a lot of switching between languages. Some people say this is bad, but the main thing is that the teachers use language that we can understand. What's the point of teaching a perfect lesson in English if we can't understand? So Chinese played an important part, even in English class.

In senior high school, the most important influence was the public examinations and preparing for them. English was now more important than other subjects because I needed it to learn the other subjects. Also, the English exams were different. In the past, you only had to know grammar and vocabulary, but now you needed a much deeper understanding because you were tested on listening and speaking. The public exams completely dominated my life because my future depended on getting good results, and getting good results required good English. Everything we did was based on the exams. What it tested, we learned!

But I also started to see the importance of English out of class. I realized that I needed the language if I wanted to communicate with other people. When I was young, it never occurred to me that I would talk with a foreigner in English. The teacher also stressed the importance of using English out of class. She encouraged us to watch English television and subscribe to English language newspapers. But I hardly ever did these things; I was too lazy. I couldn't see how they would help me pass the public examination. English was important because of the exams. Sometimes I would read a newspaper if it was required for an assignment, but that's all.

Then in form seven, I had an experience that changed my attitude. I took a summer job at Philips and, because it was on Hong Kong Island, I came into contact with a lot of foreigners. I was the only one in the store who could speak much English at all, and it made me feel superior. But speaking with foreigners made me realize my deficiencies. I sometimes had to get them to repeat three or four times before I could understand. And I noticed that the English that foreigners spoke was different from the English that Chinese people spoke. This experience made me realize that I really did need to learn English more wholeheartedly, that I would have a need to communicate with other people one day and that English is really very important.

Now that I'm at university, I think of English in a very different way from when I was in school. I don't have the pressure of an English exam hanging over me, and I use English, not because I have to take an exam, but because it's the medium of communication. Many of my lecturers are foreigners, so if I talk to them I have to use English. You have to write, speak and think in English. It's part of daily life. Also, if you're good at English you feel superior, and other people look at you as though you're superior. One of the differences between English and other subjects such as Geography is that I don't look at people who are good at Geography as that smart, necessarily, but I think of someone who is fluent in English as very smart.

# DOG RICE AND CULTURAL DISSONANCE

This chapter presents the results of an empirical investigation into languages and cultures in contact. Data for the study consisted of a critical incident that took place between me and a shopkeeper in Bangkok. The encounter raised issues of intercultural (mis)communication, and demonstrated that underlying even the simplest intercultural encounter are complex linguistic and cultural issues and assumptions.

Reprinted from D. Nunan and J. Choi (eds.), *Language and Culture: Reflective Narratives and the Emergence of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 2010.

The first foreign language that I was ever taught was Latin. I attended the local Catholic boys' school in a mining town in the semi-arid interior of Australia. After my mother's death, I was going through her rather meager possessions and came across my school report cards. I have no idea why she kept these. They did not paint a particularly flattering portrait of me as a young student. ('David is a distraction to himself and all those around him.') One fact that did surprise me however was the number of students in the class – 86. It never struck me or, as far as I know it, any of my classmates that this was at all unusual. We did not consider ourselves to be victims of 'the large class' syndrome. Class sizes of 80 to 90 students were the norm, although they must have been hell for our teachers – the Marist Brothers and lay teachers. I realize now why we were mostly addressed as 'boy' or 'you' – they simply didn't have the head space to remember all of our names.

We were taught Latin because it was the firm conviction of the Brothers that all 86 of us should aspire to join a religious order. To qualify for the seminary, we would need Latin. It was the firm conviction of most of us that we should get the hell out of the school as soon as the law allowed and join our fathers, uncles and brothers on one of the mines. By the end of junior high school, the number of students in the class had plummeted to 14. By then, however, the Brothers had long given up on us and switched us from Latin to Geography. I was extremely disappointed. Most of my classmates couldn't care less either

way, although a previous owner of my dog-eared Latin primer would have been pleased. On the inside of the cover, he had written:

Latin is a language as dead as dead can be  
It killed the mighty Romans.  
And now it's killing me.

Latin stood me in good stead when it came to my next attempt at learning a foreign language – Italian. Or so I thought during the first few lessons. I started studying Italian for fun just after I had graduated from university. Also because I met the person who taught the course at a social event and she convinced me it would be fun. After the first few lessons, as the learning load increased exponentially, it became somewhat less than fun. Despite my experience with Latin, a considerable number of years ago now, Italian grammar trips me up at every twist and turn. And do I really care whether or not Mrs. Bruni finds her way to the post office? She's a native speaker of Italian, after all. If she can't find her way there, what hope do I have? It isn't until I go to Italy the following year and attempt to activate my 'book learning' that the language begins to fall into place.

My third attempt to be rescued from the disease of monolingualism (which bumper stickers assure me is curable) occurs when I take a position as an assistant professor at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. I find myself living in a neighborhood where no-one speaks any English. (As this is the late 1970s to early 1980s this could be practically anywhere in Bangkok.) I throw myself into the task of learning what, in those days, was an exotic tonal language – these days, of course, thousands of foreigners are totally fluent in the language. When I tell my Thai acquaintances that I plan to learn Thai, they applaud my ambition, but then pour cold water on it by telling me that Thai is an impossible language to learn. My Western friends just laugh and give a 'been there, failed at that' roll of the eyes.

My narrative is an account of a single incident that occurred at a point where I had acquired a reasonable degree of proficiency in the language. First, I present the narrative. Then I try to make sense of the incident in terms of the theme of this collection: language, culture and identity in contact. Although the narrative presented might appear to be somewhat pedestrian, if not trivial, it was critical to my identity as a second language user in ways that I explore later in the chapter.

I live at the end of a very deep *soi* in Bangkok. *Sois* are lanes that snake their way off the main arterial roads in Bangkok. It takes about 15 minutes to make my way to the main road. Sometimes I take a *tuk-tuk*, or three-wheel taxi. I do this relatively infrequently – when I'm not feeling well, or when I have a heavy load of shopping – because it costs 2 baht and on my (local) salary this is extravagant. Despite the heat, today I decide to walk. By the time I get to the mouth of the soi my shirt is sticking to my back. It's a Saturday afternoon, and I'm on a shopping expedition. I go to the wet market on the opposite side of the main road for fruit, vegetables, fish and pork, and then cross back to buy a bag of rice at the rice store. That is all they sell – rice. There are five grades of rice. The top grade is eaten by the Thai royal family, corporate CEOs and foreigners (otherwise known as *farang*). It is comparatively expensive. Not surprisingly, the bottom grade is the cheapest. It is eaten by dogs and by me. Unlike most foreigners working in Bangkok, I am not wealthy. In fact, as a teacher working

on local terms, I struggle to make ends meet. I am paid the same salary as Thai teachers, but have to pay foreign prices for most things. The assumption is that all foreigners earn whacking great salaries and should therefore pass a little of this largesse back to the Thais. This has given rise to the two-tier system of charges, something of which most foreigners are blissfully unaware. Only those who have learned to read Thai can decipher the squiggles on the admissions counter at Dusit Zoo announcing that the entry fee for Thais is 10 baht, while the rest of humanity will have to pay 25.

I don't eat dog rice out of extreme poverty. Despite my modest salary, even I can afford the grade that is enjoyed by nobility. I eat dog rice because I actually prefer it to the fancier and more expensive stuff. It has a chewy, almost meaty texture that I really like. This admission will probably annoy my family and embarrass my friends, but it's out there now. And I am not alone. This shameful preference for the cheapest variety of rice has been admitted to me (often after one or two Beer Singhas), not only by foreigners, but also by Thais.

The rice shop is about as basic as any shop can be. It is long and narrow, with a counter and five big bins of rice. It is dark inside the shop, a nice relief from the relentless glare of the sun outdoors. There is a musty smell, and the countertop and floor are dusted with fine powder from the rice bags.

The woman who runs the rice store has her back to me as I enter. She is pouring rice into bags, weighing them and then sealing them up. I bid her a good morning in Thai. She replies, and asks what I would like. I ask for a bag of dog rice. Continuing to pour rice into bags, she asks me what kind of dog I have.

'Oh, I don't have a dog,' I reply.

'So what do you plan to do with the rice?' she asks.

'I plan to eat it.'

At this she turns around.

Registering me as a *farang*, a look of horror flashes across her face. She drops the bag of rice she is holding onto the counter and says to me in Thai 'Phut pasa angrit mai dai' (I don't speak English).

'I wasn't speaking English,' I reply to her in Thai.

'Phom paasa angrit mai dai' (I don't speak English), she repeats.

'I'm not speaking English.' It does no good. The linguistic shutters have gone up. I point to a bag of dog rice and push some coins across the counter.

I worked hard at becoming fluent in Thai, the first tonal language I had attempted to learn. I did this for two reasons. Firstly, I lived in a neighborhood where no one spoke English. To meet my basic daily needs, I had to learn Thai. Secondly, and this sounds rather mealy mouthed but it happens to be true, I wanted to show my respect for the country and the culture in which I was living. I wanted to identify with Thai language and culture. I liked the language and the people. I loved the food and would often wander around the covered wet market near my home even when I had nothing in particular to buy (although there was *always* something to buy in the wet markets!). I even enjoyed the weather. About the only thing I did not enjoy was the traffic.

Before proceeding with an interpretation of the narrative, I should make a brief comment on how I am using 'culture' in this piece. As we noted in our framing chapter to the collection, there are well over 100 definitions of culture in the literature (Gudykunst and Kim 2003). I rather like Judd's characterization. Judd suggests that culture can be defined as '... the system of shared objects, activities and beliefs of a given group of people' (Judd, 2002: 10). While

the definition may appear simple, and even simplistic, it captures the three essential variables that differentiate a given culture from other cultures: the artifacts or tools that members of the culture possess, the ways they behave, and the beliefs they hold. In my narrative, the artifacts were language and the Thai classification system of rice. The behavior was the interaction between me and the rice-seller, and the beliefs had to do with what was considered possible in terms of foreigner use of the Thai language.

Attempting to define identity is just as tricky as trying to define culture. I think one reason for this is that capturing the essence of any given culture can only be done in terms of 'the other'. Just as a fish is unaware of water (until it is removed from the stream), so we are unaware of our own culture until we rub up against another culture. I should modify this from 'culture' to 'cultures' as we all simultaneously belong to multiple cultures or subcultures, although we may not be consciously aware of the fact. At its simplest, identity is the recognition of membership of a particular culture or subculture. I find it impossible to talk about identity without considering culture, and I wonder whether, in fact, the constructs are separable. For me they are not.

How does this speak to the dog rice incident? Most second language acquisition research into the construct of identity is based on the assumption that an individual's identity is derived from his or her membership of one or more social groups. (See, for example, Tajfel, 1981.) The dog rice incident (and this was just one of many that occurred to me in my time in Thailand) reinforced the fact that there was never any possibility that I could identify with the target culture in the sense of becoming a member of that culture, and, in fact, it would have been a form of cultural arrogance to expect that I should be accepted. What I did want, however, was to be acknowledged and accepted as a competent speaker of the language and someone who was sensitive to and appreciative of the culture. In some ways, the dog rice incident served to push me away. Alienation would be too strong a word, but such incidents (and, as I say, there were many during my time in Thailand) did engender a sense of social distance – a rather childish attitude of 'if you don't want me, then I don't want you'.

According to Schumann's acculturation model, the greater the cultural distance between two cultures, the greater will be the difficulty in learning the language of the other culture. My experience of living and working in Thailand and attempting to learn the language certainly supports this notion. Once it became apparent to me that attempting to narrow the gap between my culture and my adopted culture was futile, indeed contradictory, my motivation declined. Having developed a comfortable working knowledge of the language, I was no longer motivated, as I had been in the beginning, to become a highly proficient user of the language. I was able to 'get by' quite comfortably with my current level of proficiency, and my inability to 'close the gap' between my own cultural space and that of my host culture acted as a disincentive to further effort. (For a detailed review of current considerations of identity in L2 learning, see Ricento, 2005.)

In thinking about the intersection between language and culture, I recalled Halliday's (1993: 11) comment that

Language neither drives culture nor is driven by it: the old question about which determines which can be set aside as irrelevant, because the relation is not one of cause and effect but rather (as Firth saw it, though not



in these words) one of realization: that is, culture and language co-evolve in the same relationship as that in which, within language, meaning and expression co-evolve. Thus, above and beyond the random, local variation between languages that was the subject matter of earlier topological studies, we may expect to find nonrandom variation realizing different construals of reality across major alterations in the human condition.

Earlier I hinted at the difficulty of separating culture and identity. Indeed, I suggested that one can only be defined in terms of the other. Halliday has now thrown language into the mix. Halliday, of course, was speaking phylogenically about the evolution of language and culture in general. My experience was ontological, and concerned the individual experience of acquiring a second language. The experience of learning another language does, however, drive home the complex interrelationships between language and culture, in this case a four-way interrelationship between my first language, my home culture, the target language and the target culture. In interactions with native speakers of Thai, a set of reciprocal relationships and assumptions had also to be taken into account – that is, the attitudes and frames of reference of my interlocutor about his or her home language and culture as well as assumptions about my first language and culture. The number of variables therefore grows to eight. (The literature on ‘host culture’ and ‘host custom’ is pertinent here. See, for example, Cushner and Brislin, 1996; Gudykunst and Kim, 2003.)

In other words, I had assumptions and beliefs about:

- my first language and the way it is used to get things done;
- my home culture and the norms and rules in that culture that have to be followed to get things done;
- the Thai language and the way it is used to get things done;
- the Thai culture and the norms and rules in that culture that have to be followed to get things done.

However, there is also, and always, ‘the other’, in this case the dog rice lady and her assumptions and beliefs about:

- her first language and the way it is used to get things done;
- her home culture and the norms and rules in that culture that have to be followed to get things done;
- the *farang*’s language and the way it is used to get things done;
- the *farang*’s culture and the norms and rules in that culture that have to be followed to get things done.

Getting something done, even something as simple as buying a bag of rice, will call into play these eight sets of assumptions and beliefs. I’m not suggesting that these will be well formed or even consciously held but they will frame the interaction nonetheless. The success or otherwise of an interaction will hinge on the crucible into which these eight variables are thrown. In most intercultural interactions, stereotypes and misperceptions are the norm. (Regrettably, in many Asian cultures, some Westerners get away with bad behavior because they know they are expected to behave badly.) However, roadblocks on the road to effective communication can be dealt with if there is good-will and a willingness

to negotiate, as Block (2010) so powerfully attests. Vittachi (2010) also has some interesting things to say on this issue.

When I was moving to Thailand, I made an initial foray into the language and also attempted to find out what I could about the culture. I found that 'outsider' descriptions of Thai culture tended to be grossly oversimplified. Kramsch (1991: 218) calls this the 'four Fs' in which culture is reduced to 'foods, fairs, folklore and statistical facts'. In my case, prior to moving to Thailand, my cultural sensitivity training consisted mainly of practical tips such as 'Don't pat small children on the head' and 'Don't point the soles of your feet at others when sitting down.' Underlying these practical tips was the complex panoply of Buddhist cosmology of which, at the time, I was blissfully unaware. Most cultural sensitivity and awareness can only be picked up as one makes mistakes and confronts cultural and linguistic dilemmas in situ. It is one thing to learn the different forms of address to use to those of higher and lower status (one's work colleagues and landlady versus servants, waiters and small children). I had no trouble in knowing how to address my landlady, a very wealthy member of the Thai establishment and President of the Bangkok Bank of Commerce, but how did I address her grandsons? Did I use the high status *khun* form or the diminutive *nou* (meaning mouse)? It was as bad to use the high status form inappropriately as it was to use the low status form. When greeting people with a *wai*, palms held together as though praying, how high should one hold one's hands? The only way to learn was to get it wrong, but then learn from one's mistake.

The incident with the dog rice lady, trivial as it was on the surface, triggered in me a chain reaction of thoughts, emotions and reactions. I was in the process of forming my identity as a *farang* in Thailand, and desperately wanted to avoid being stereotyped as 'one of those overbearing strangers with big noses who are badly behaved'. I wanted to become fluent in the language and get close to the culture, realizing that I could not have one without the other.

There is considerable evidence that the ability to connect with the target culture and community outside of the classroom significantly enhances the language learning experience. Take for instance Campbell's (1996) diary study of her experience as a language learner of Spanish in Mexico. Halfway through her intensive language course she began dating one of her teachers (Tito). This gave her an entrée into rich language learning and cultural experiences such as parties, family gatherings and weddings. In one of her diary entries, she notes:

Week 5: There were plenty of positive aspects to the evening at the Piano Bar in terms of language learning. I heard a lot of slang and fillers that I haven't gotten anywhere else. Maybe I could pick some up if I had more of the input. I did have to talk a lot in Spanish, like to Alberto and Mari's brother. And with Tito I spoke Spanish and he often spoke English, but not all the time. I spoke English only when I had a difficult verb structure coming up – past modals, counterfactual conditionals, etc. I commented at one point how I was speaking Spanish and he English, and he said it was fun. And it's true, it *was* fun.

(Campbell, 1996: 211)

There is also evidence that an inability to connect with the target culture can have a seriously damaging effect on one's ability to climb beyond the foothills of a foreign language. The classic story of the dissonance between attempts to learn

language and attitudes towards the culture in which the language is embedded is told by Schumann, who documents the failure of a Puerto Rican immigrant into the United States. Carlos failed to learn English despite repeated attempts to do so. Schumann concluded that his informant's failure to learn English could be traced to his inability or unwillingness to identify with the culture of the United States. Out of his case study, Schumann developed the acculturation model. (See Schumann, 1978a, 1978b.)

It was my inability to tap into such rich linguistic, cultural and social experiences that led to considerable frustration on my part. Perhaps, like Cherry Campbell, I should have found myself a Thai girlfriend! (Actually, the thesis I am pursuing here is that even this would probably not have helped me cross the cultural divide to the extent that I wanted.) Peck (1996) makes the point that cultural sensitivity is a two-way process, and we can't mandate sensitivity when it comes to the host culture. The thesis I am advancing in this piece is that it is much more than that: that it is a complex, multilayered process involving at least eight interacting variables between interlocutors.

Another issue, which I will touch on here, but will not elaborate upon, concerns the status of the languages involved in the interaction. Block (2010) makes the point that the use of English can place native speakers of other languages at a considerable disadvantage even though they are communicating within their own culture. I chose to speak in Thai, not because I wanted to exercise linguistic hegemony, but because I knew the dog rice lady simply wouldn't understand. In fact I could have used the 'point and grunt' technique to get what I wanted. However, in addition to getting my bag of dog rice, I wanted to send a message. 'Solidarity' is too strong and too smug a word. I wanted the dog rice lady to feel that, through using her language, I was trying to get closer to her culture. Eventually, I came away from the rice shop with a bag of dog rice and an acute sense of failure.

I discussed my experience of attempting to use Thai with other foreigners who had lived and worked in Thailand much longer than I had done, and most reported similar experiences. Several took their inability to reach their desired level of intimacy with the culture badly, and became cynical and critical. Their attitude appeared to be 'If they won't accept me, then I'm going to reject them.' This sometimes led to hypercritical complaining sessions in which every shortcoming of life in Thailand was criticized no matter how trivial or imaginary it might be.

On the other side of the ledger, there were a great many Thais who seemed genuinely pleased at my attempts to master the language. They would go out of their way to act as my informant, cheer leader and practice partner and to fulfill various other roles.

## **Conclusion**

In this piece, I have tried to argue that even a simple transaction in another culture such as buying a bag of rice can raise complex and problematic issues of language, culture and identity. I have also suggested that this complexity arises from a complex eight-way interplay between the assumptions and beliefs of the interlocutors about their own language and culture and the language and culture of 'the other'. This interplay is complex, subtle and not always conscious. It

plays out in situations where success often crucially depends on a considerable degree of good-will on the part of the interlocutors.

I guess the moral of a story that takes its departure from a single, seemingly simple intercultural encounter is that our own foreign language identities are co-constructed by our interlocutors through a complex, multilayered process. This process involves the interaction of self and other beliefs about language and culture. When we dig beneath the surface, even the simplest transactional encounter can bring us face to face with the question: who are we, when we use a language other than our first?

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# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “LANGUAGE AWARE”?

This chapter is a slightly updated version of a plenary presentation at the International Language Awareness Conference that was held at the University of Hong Kong. In the paper, I take a critical look at the notion of language awareness from the perspective of second language acquisition (SLA). I also explore what it means to ‘know’ a second language.

Plenary presentation, International Language Awareness Conference, Hong Kong, 2008.

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to take a critical look at the concept of language awareness (LA). In the first part of the paper, I will briefly review current understandings of the concept and relate it to applications in second language pedagogy including consciousness raising (CR), noticing and focus on form. In the bulk of the paper, I will explore some problematic aspects of the concept, addressing the following questions:

At what point can one say an individual is ‘language aware’?

Is there a relationship between language awareness and second language acquisition?

What types of knowledge (procedural versus declarative, implicit versus explicit) are consistent with current conceptions of language awareness?

What are the pedagogical implications of the concept?

## Introduction

Given the fact that this is the Eric Hawkins plenary, it is appropriate to begin this presentation by paying tribute to the person who more than anyone put the concept on the map. As far back as the 1960s, Hawkins argued the case for language awareness and, in his 1984 book *Awareness of Language: An Introduction*, he presented a compelling case for language as an object of study in its

own right. Although it was aimed at first rather than second language users, it resonated strongly with those of us involved in second language education, as it appeared at a time when the role of grammar in second and foreign language learning was being questioned by Krashen (1981, 1982) and others. For those of us who felt that Krashen had overstated his case, Hawkins' work provided a welcome redress.

This is not to say that Hawkins 'created' the LA movement. As van Essen (1997) argues in an overview of the field, the movement can be traced back as far as von Humboldt in the eighteenth century. However, LA only came into prominence as a field of study in its own right, particularly in the United Kingdom, in the 1970s and the 1980s. When I was a graduate student in England in the mid-1970s, I can remember the impact of the Bullock Report (1975) on the reappraisal of the place of language across the curriculum, and not just in the English classroom. The work of Michael Halliday (1975) was also significant in that country before he moved to the University of Sydney. Some years later Ron Carter's (1990) LINC project gave added impetus to the notion that language is of fundamental importance across the curriculum. (For a review of the history of LA in the United Kingdom, see Donmall-Hicks, 1997.)

I should say at the outset that I intend to look at language awareness from a second language learning perspective. I make no apology for this. Second language teaching and learning is what I know about. However, it should be noted that the assertions and assumptions as well as the theoretical perspectives and empirical data I draw on to support my arguments will differ somewhat from an L1 perspective.

In the first part of the paper, I will review definitions of language awareness. I will then discuss three propositions concerning language awareness. I will suggest that these propositions, while widely held and articulated, are problematic in several respects. I then turn to a discussion of types of language knowledge, looking in particular at procedural, declarative, explicit and implicit knowledge as they relate to language awareness. My main concern here is to explore the extent to which the constructs can be separated in an operational, rather than theoretical, sense.

## **Defining language awareness**

The Association of Language Awareness offers the following definition of language awareness:

Language Awareness can be defined as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use. It covers a wide spectrum of fields. For example, Language Awareness issues include exploring the benefits that can be derived from developing a good knowledge about language, a conscious understanding of how languages work, of how people learn them and use them.

([http://www.lexically.net/ala/la\\_defined.htm](http://www.lexically.net/ala/la_defined.htm).

Downloaded March 18, 2008)

Van Lier (1995: xi) defines the construct as

... an understanding of the human faculty of language and its role in thinking, learning, and social life. It includes an awareness of power and control through language and the intricate relationships between language use and culture.

In a similar vein, Thornbury (2007) defines teacher language awareness (TLA) as

the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of language that enables them to teach effectively.

As one final example, Jones (1997) argues that:

Language awareness means making explicit and conscious the students' intuitive use of learning procedures, drawing, of course, on the current state of knowledge in these matters.

(Jones, 1997: 78)

While these definitions have their own points of focus, they all share the view that language awareness involves an explicit and conscious knowledge of language learning, teaching and use. I will return to these focal points at several times during the presentation.

### **Three propositions concerning language awareness**

In this section, I wish to discuss three propositions relating to language awareness. The first is that it is possible to provide an operational definition of the construct. The second is that language awareness leads to better language teaching and learning. The third, and related, proposition is that there is a direct relationship between language awareness and language proficiency.

The first question that I wish to address is: at what point is an individual second language learner language aware? An undeniable fact of language is that it is as complex a social and psychological human phenomenon as any that has evolved along with humankind. Despite the lifelong efforts of countless linguists, psychologists, anthropologists and others it has defied comprehensive description and analysis. We can't even agree on what language actually is. Is it a highly abstract psychological phenomenon, or a tool for creating, negotiating and exchanging meaning? Or is it both? What are the origins of language? How did it evolve, and to what extent is it hard-wired into the human brain?

This is not to say that our knowledge of language, its development and use have not grown exponentially in the last 50 or 60 years. In fact, if you look at the number of studies that have been carried out and the number of books and journals that have been published, you could say that there has been an explosion in linguistic theory and research – there have been several revolutions, the odd paradigm shift and a couple of beheadings! The fact remains, however, that, in terms of comprehensive description and analysis, we haven't even come close to pinning down the construct.

So I return to my question. Given the complexity of the phenomenon, at what point can an individual be judged language aware? Years ago, my younger daughter came back from her first day as a high school student at West Island School

here in Hong Kong. She was in a state of great excitement. I asked her what was up. 'I know Spanish! I know Spanish!' she cried in excitement. The fact was that after her first foreign language lesson she could say her name in Spanish. This was proof that she 'knew' Spanish. Seven years later, as she faced the prospect of her A-level Spanish exams, she was not so sure. The anecdote does underscore the point that, in terms of language learners and users, we are probably talking about processes and attitudes as much as pedagogical outcomes.

Ultimately, of course, the question can only be answered by learners themselves. In the psychological and applied linguistics literature, there is some evidence that metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness is a moveable feast. Some learners are able to function in a second language at an implicit and procedural level, while others need explicit and declarative knowledge. This 'knowledge orientation', if I can call it that, seems to be aligned with cognitive style orientations. (I shall return to this issue later in the paper.)

In terms of teacher language awareness, there has been considerable debate about knowledge outcomes. Most of us are aware of the so-called language teaching fallacy (Phillipson, 1992), the notion that a native speaker of English, by virtue of his or her native language endowment, will necessarily be a more competent teacher of English than native speakers of other languages. While the argument was simplistic, naïve, demonstrably incorrect and comprehensively challenged years ago, it persists, and pops up as a theme at language teaching conferences around the world. In fact, it was a major theme in a symposium at a conference I attended in Phnom Penh a few months ago. When I was TESOL President, I was constantly approached by teachers of English in different parts of the world who wanted TESOL to advocate on their behalf. These professionals had impeccable qualifications, but were denied either employment or advancement because they were not native speakers of English.

TESOL's policy at the time, and I assume one that remains in place today, is that first language status should not be a criterion measure for employment or advancement, that knowledge and skills, couched in performance terms, should be the determinant of employment. Comprehensive sets of performance standards were developed during the late 1990s. These included language awareness standards. (For a description and review see Nunan 2007b.)

The question remains, however: Is it possible, feasible or even desirable to set minimum benchmark levels of awareness? What would they look like? How would they be assessed? How can they be calibrated for learners at different levels of proficiency? How can they be calibrated for teachers at different points in their career? (Presumably we would not want the same benchmarks to apply to entry level teachers as to master teachers, panel chairs, senior language instructors and the like.)

Consideration of the question 'What does it mean to be "language aware"?' led to a second and third question, namely: Does language awareness lead to more effective language learners, users or teachers? and Is there a direct relationship between language awareness ('explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching') and language proficiency? The language awareness movement assumes that there is.

Those who seek to improve the language awareness of students and of their teachers assume that there is a direct relationship between knowledge



of formal aspects of language and performance when using the language. They believe that students who can analyze and describe language accurately are likely to be more effective users of the language. They also believe that teachers' understanding of the language they teach and their ability to analyze it will contribute significantly and directly to their effectiveness as teachers.

(Andrews, 2007: 946)

I have already dealt with the issue of teacher language awareness, and take it as axiomatic that subject matter knowledge is an essential requirement for any language teacher. At issue are quantity and nature. How much knowledge is enough, and what type of knowledge counts? I have already touched on the 'native speaker fallacy' that speaking a language is the necessary and sufficient criterion for teaching the language.

At this point, what I want to examine is the proposition that learner language awareness feeds directly into language competence, in other words that declarative subject knowledge leads directly to procedural knowledge, or performance. The Association of Language Awareness frames the following questions on its website:

Can we become better language users or learners or teachers if we develop a better understanding? And can we gain other advantages: e.g. in our relations with other people and/or cultures, and in our ability to see through language that manipulates or discriminates? Language Awareness interests also include learning more about what sorts of ideas about language people normally operate with, and what effects these have on how they conduct their everyday affairs: e.g. their professional dealings.

([http://www.lexically.net/ala/la\\_defined.htm](http://www.lexically.net/ala/la_defined.htm). Downloaded March 18, 2008)

I would argue that, if language awareness is operationalized as the explicit, declarative knowledge of formal aspects of language, then the proposition is problematic. As we shall later see, there is compelling evidence that the relationship between declarative and procedural knowledge is complex and indirect. There is no space here to review in detail the significant body of research that has looked at the extent to which learners learn what teachers teach. What I will try to do is to highlight some of the outcomes of the research. I should also add that most of the SLA research into this issue has focused on morphosyntax rather than lexis, phonology, discourse or culture.

As with most research into complex linguistic issues the results are mixed. In evaluating the studies it is necessary to tease out a number of factors. Firstly, what were the biographical characteristics of the subjects involved in the research (age, first language, prior learning experiences, opportunities for activating language out of class, etc.)? What research paradigm was used (formal experiment, quasi-experiment or naturalistic research)? How were the data collected (through observation or some form of elicitation device)? What was the specific focus of the research (general proficiency, specific language items, etc.)? What instructional procedures were deployed (e.g. deductive versus inductive)? How was the construct of 'knowledge' operationalized, i.e. how were learning outcomes measured (through a test or through observation of language in use)?

The complexity and range of these research factors are highlighted by Ellis. In relation to research foci, he writes that:

This research is of four different kinds. One group of studies has sought to examine whether learners who receive formal instruction achieve higher levels of L2 proficiency than those who do not. A second group has considered the effects of formal instruction on the accuracy with which learners use specific linguistic items and rules. A third group has studied whether formal instruction affects the order or sequence of acquisition. A fourth group has investigated to what extent any effects for instruction are durable.

(Ellis, 1994: 612)

In terms of learning outcomes, the results differ according to the ways in which those outcomes are measured. For example, learners will demonstrate different learning profiles according to whether a formal test of some kind such as multiple choice, elicited imitation or grammaticality judgement is used, or whether the data are collected through spontaneous language use.

What I have tried to demonstrate so far is that the results of research into the effects of explicit instruction on learning outcomes are equivocal. This is due to the range of factors involved in data collection and analysis and the complexity of the construct that the research is attempting to investigate: language itself.

Numerous meta-analyses have been conducted to investigate the effect of instruction. As long ago as 1983, Long reviewed 11 studies investigating the issue. Six studies showed that formal instruction was beneficial; three showed that it was not. One study showed that exposure without formal instruction was effective. Two studies showed that instruction had a negative effect on learning. Despite the mixed results, Long concluded that formal instruction, however that is defined, was, on balance, effective.

Subsequent work by Long and others suggests that formal instruction is beneficial on the rate of learning and ultimate attainment, but it has a negligible effect on the route of learning. In other words, it is beneficial for overall language proficiency development but not for the learning of specific language items.

I would like to conclude this section by arguing that the hypothesized direction of influence, from awareness raising to learning outcomes, may be an oversimplification, that in fact there is a complex two-way interaction between these constructs. In other words, language use can lead to awareness as well as the other way around. There is some evidence to support this proposition. Investigations into language acquisition in both formal and naturalistic contexts have shown that the use of formulaic utterances can be important mechanisms in second language acquisition, particularly in the early stages. A formulaic utterance is an unanalysed chunk of language which is used communicatively. Learners know what the chunk can do because they first encountered it and used it in context. Over time, they gradually break down or analyse the chunk into its constituent parts. In other words, language use results in awareness rather than the other way around. Klein (1991) argues that this fundamental cognitive mechanism is functionally motivated:

It is . . . functions . . . which drive the learner to break down parts of the input and to organize them into small subsystems, which are reorganized

whenever a new piece from the flood of input is added, until eventually the target system is reached (or more or less approximated).

(Klein, 1991: 220)

Similarly, Johnston (1987) argues the case that acquisition is formulaically driven. In the following quote, he discusses the way in which negation in English is acquired in stages as the learner moves from formulaic usage through a series of progressive approximations towards native-like mastery:

. . . the case of 'don't' shows that formulaic language can serve as what we might call the seedbed of propositional language. While it may still be necessary to use terms like formula in some kinds of linguistic discussion, the way in which a chunk like 'don't' is reanalysed by application of the rules for its production in a widening range of verbal environments makes it clear that the progression from formulaic language to productive language involves no hard and fast distinctions.

(Johnston, 1987: 24)

For a more detailed review and analysis, see Ellis (2008). For an example of the interaction between awareness and use, see Schmidt's case study of his own attempts to master Portuguese in both naturalistic and tutored contexts (Schmidt and Frota, 1985). For a contrary view on the role of formulae, see Krashen and Scarcella (1978).

## Types of language knowledge

As we have seen, most definitions of language awareness refer to explicit knowledge. In this section I would like to explore the construct of 'knowledge' a little further, and look at other forms of knowledge representation. Within the cognitive psychology literature, a range of knowledge types has been identified. These have been appropriated by applied linguists. Cognitive psychologists argue that, in addition to explicit knowledge, there is also implicit knowledge. Another widely cited distinction is between declarative and procedural knowledge. The issue here is whether these other forms of knowledge, particularly procedural and implicit knowledge, might also count as part of language awareness. Before addressing this question, I shall give a brief description of these different types of knowledge.

In his extensive discussion of the implicit/explicit knowledge distinction, Ellis (2008) offer the following definitions of the two constructs:

IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE is intuitive, procedural, systematically variable, automatic, and thus available for use in fluent, unplanned language use. It is not verbalizable. According to some theorists it is only learnable before learners reach a critical age (for example, puberty).

EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE is conscious, declarative, anomalous, and inconsistent (i.e. it takes the form of 'fuzzy' rules inconsistently applied) and generally only accessible through controlled processing in planned language use. It is verbalizable, in which case it entails semi-technical or technical metalanguage. Like any type of factual knowledge, it is potentially learnable at any age.

He then goes on to contrast the two types of knowledge in terms of seven characteristics:

- 1 Awareness: Whether the learner is intuitively or consciously aware of linguistic norms
- 2 Type of knowledge: Whether the knowledge is procedural or declarative
- 3 Systematicity: Whether the knowledge is variable but systematic or anomalous and inconsistent
- 4 Accessibility: Whether the knowledge is accessed through automatic or controlled processing
- 5 Use of L2 knowledge: Whether the knowledge is exhibited through fluent performance or when the learner is experiencing planning difficulty
- 6 Self-report: Whether the knowledge is verbalizable or not
- 7 Learnability: Whether the knowledge is learnable pre-puberty or at any age.

Ellis's claim, then, is that implicit knowledge, which operates below the level of conscious awareness, and is manifested through procedural capacity, can only be acquired pre-puberty. His model is thus tied in to the highly controversial critical period hypothesis.

A contentious issue in the SLA literature is whether implicit and explicit knowledge exist on a continuum or whether they are dichotomous. There is some evidence to support both positions. Karmiloff-Smith (1992), for example, shows how implicit linguistic knowledge becomes progressively more explicit in children as they mature. Other evidence, however, suggests that the two types of knowledge are neurolinguistically distinct (see, for example, Paradis, 1994). An empirical study specifically designed to test this issue suggested that the two types of knowledge do represent different constructs.

Accepting that implicit and explicit knowledge represent two neurolinguistically distinct types of knowledge (and on balance the evidence would seem to point in this direction) does not mean that pedagogically the two need to be kept separate, as Krashen (1982) argued. As Schmidt (1994) points out, we need to distinguish between implicit/explicit knowledge and implicit/explicit learning. Following on from this, Ellis (2008) argues that 'it is perfectly possible to claim that conscious attention is involved in implicit learning while maintaining that the products of such learning are not themselves available to consciousness'.

A second pair of constructs widely cited in the literature are declarative and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge is knowledge that can be stated or 'declared'. For example, 'When making declarative statements in the third person singular, put "s" on the end of the verb.' Procedural knowledge is actually being able to deploy the knowledge in practice. It is assumed that declarative knowledge is acquired first and is gradually turned into procedural knowledge through practice.

According to Anderson there are three key differences between these two types of knowledge:

- 1 Declarative knowledge seems to be possessed in an all-or-none manner, whereas procedural knowledge seems to be something that can be partially possessed.

- 2 One acquires declarative knowledge suddenly, by being told, whereas one acquires procedural knowledge gradually, by performing the skill.
- 3 One can communicate one's declarative knowledge verbally, but not one's procedural knowledge.

(1976: 117)

Several aspects of Anderson's characterization are problematic. The first is that declarative knowledge comes first. As we have seen, a key SLA process is the transformation of formulaic language use into analysed linguistic knowledge. It could be argued that this process represents a movement from procedural (automatic) language use to controlled (declarative) language use. Secondly, I would contest the notion that declarative knowledge is all-or-nothing. There is evidence in the SLA literature to suggest that language development is, in fact, an organic/transformational process (Nunan, 1999). I will return to this metaphor of language development later in the paper.

Bialystok (1982) and Ellis (2008) point out that the explicit/implicit distinction is not coterminous with the declarative/procedural distinction. Explicit/implicit refers to the degree of consciousness, while declarative/procedural refers to the degree of control the learner exercises over the language. This results in four types of language knowledge, as shown in Figure 13.1.

Theoretically, it is possible, then, to have four types of knowledge, although personally I cannot see how it is possible to have knowledge that is at one and the same time implicit and declarative. I also wonder whether it is possible to test the model empirically (a point acknowledged by Ellis, 2008), because I do not believe it is possible to devise elicitation instruments that would unambiguously target these four kinds of knowledge.

## Some pedagogical implications

### *A place for a focus on language systems*

There are some who believe that the jury is still out on the question of whether or not form-focused instruction facilitates second language acquisition. There is

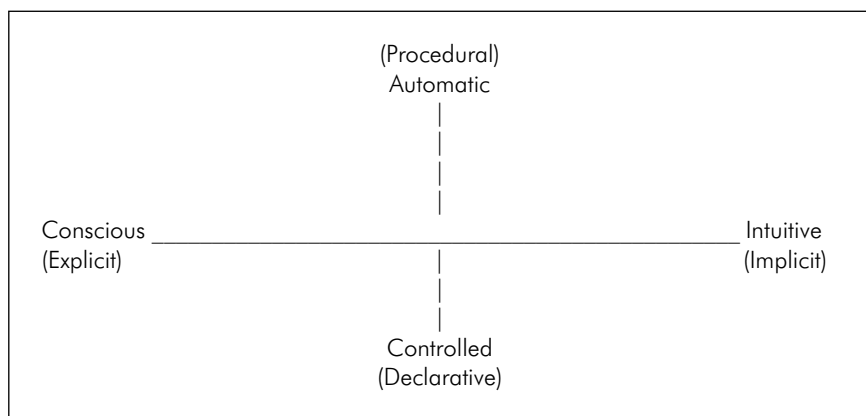


Figure 13.1 Four types of language knowledge

a growing body of evidence to suggest that it does (see, for example, Doughty and Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2008), although the relationship, certainly in terms of morphosyntax, is anything but direct. The effects themselves also appear to be variable according to whether the focus is on developmental or variational features (Pienemann and Johnston, 1985). As we saw earlier, language awareness and CR activities appear to have a beneficial effect on rate and ultimate attainment but not the route of acquisition.

In the preceding section, I made a case for expanding the way in which we operationalize the construct of ‘knowledge’ within the field of language awareness. It would be interesting to explore whether there is an interaction between different kinds of learning opportunities, variable learning outcomes and specific aspects of the three linguistic subsystems: the phonological, the lexical and the morphosyntactic (Nunan, 2007a).

### ***Language awareness and discursal contexts***

As teachers, we need to help learners to see that effective communication involves achieving harmony between functional interpretation and formal appropriacy (Halliday, 1985). As Johnston, and others, have shown, it is particularly important to establish the correct pedagogical relationship between grammatical items and the discursal contexts in which they occur. Grammar and context are so closely related that appropriate grammatical choices can often only be made with reference to the context and purpose of the communication. In fact, as Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), among others, have pointed out, there are relatively few grammatical features that are impervious to discursal context.

### ***The ‘organic’ metaphor***

Some years ago, I suggested that most foreign language programmes were based on a metaphor of language acquisition that did not fit the data that was emerging from second language acquisition research. I called this metaphor an architectural metaphor. This metaphor suggested that acquiring another language was akin to constructing a building. Underpinning the metaphor was the notion that learners learn one thing perfectly one at a time. However, from the research, we know that learners do not learn one thing perfectly one item at a time. Rather they acquire numerous items imperfectly. I suggested an alternative metaphor – an organic metaphor – more accurately captured what we know about processes of language acquisition.

The adoption of an ‘organic’ perspective can greatly enrich our understanding of language acquisition and use. Without such a perspective, our understanding of other dimensions of language such as the notion of ‘grammaticality’ will be piecemeal and incomplete, as will any attempt at understanding and interpreting utterances in isolation from the contexts in which they occur. The organic metaphor sees second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall. From such a perspective, learners do not learn one thing perfectly one item at a time, but learn numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly). The linguistic flowers do not all appear at the same time, nor do they all grow at the same rate. Some even appear to wilt, for a time, before renewing their growth. The rate and speed

are determined by a complex interplay of factors related to speech processing constraints (Pienemann and Johnston, 1987); pedagogical interventions (Pica, 1985); acquisitional processes (Johnston, 1987); and the influence of the discoursal environment in which the items occur (Levinson, 1983; McCarthy, 1991; Nunan, 1993). For comprehensive reviews of work in second language acquisition, you are referred to Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, and Ellis, 1994.

(Nunan, 1999)

## Conclusion

In this paper, I set out in search of an answer to the question: What does it mean to be 'language aware'? I framed the question in terms of second language acquisition. My search led me into the complexities of some of the constructs associated with language awareness, most particularly the issues of awareness, consciousness and knowledge. I have tried to suggest that these constructs, and their operationalization in the research process, are anything but straightforward.

The question that provided the point of departure for this exploration, 'What does it mean to be "language aware"?', turned out to be extremely elusive. Ultimately, the question can only be answered with reference to learners themselves. Here, data seem to indicate that awareness is a continuum, a moveable feast, and that learners, according to their learning style preferences and cognitive orientations, will situate themselves at different points along the continuum. Ultimately, however, in order adequately to address the question, the construct of language awareness has to be operationalized, which means describing the behaviour of a language aware user in performance terms.

This first question led me to my second, namely: Does language awareness lead to more effective language learners, users or teachers? In other words, does learner language awareness feed directly into language proficiency? This in turn tied in to the third question: What types of knowledge (procedural versus declarative, implicit versus explicit) are consistent with current conceptions of language awareness?

In the body of the paper, I argued that, if language awareness is operationalized as the explicit, declarative knowledge of formal aspects of language, then the proposition that language awareness leads to more effective language learners is problematic, because the relationship between different types of knowledge is complex and indirect, as is the relationship between awareness, use and acquisition. Distinguishing between these knowledge types, while theoretically possible, has proved to be beyond the reach of empirical investigation. Nonetheless, research to date would seem to indicate that formal instruction involving language awareness is beneficial to second language learners in terms of rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment. However, it does not seem to be effective in terms of the acquisition of specific morphosyntactic items.

In the final part of the paper, I looked at some of the practical implications of the theoretical and empirical issues discussed in the body of the paper. In this section, I looked at the place of a focus on form in the second language classroom, the relationship between language awareness and discoursal context, and the value of embracing an 'organic' metaphor in planning, teaching and evaluating language courses. In the section, I argued that, while there are some who believe the jury is still out on the question of whether or not form-focused instruction

facilitates second language acquisition, the evidence points pretty strongly in the direction of the value of a focus on form. In raising language awareness, it is crucial to frame pedagogical activities within the discursive contexts in which language occurs, rather than presenting decontextualized, discrete point exercises for learners to work on. Finally, I explored some of the implications of embracing an 'organic' rather than 'architectural' metaphor to guide us as we create courses, materials and activities for raising the language awareness of second language learners.

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## **PART III**

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# TEACHERS AND TEACHING

The three empirical studies in this part focus on teachers and teaching. Chapter 14 reports on a national curriculum research and development project carried out within the Australian Adult (Im)migrant Education Program (AMEP) which gave teachers a central role in documenting their curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation practices. In Chapter 15, a study is presented in which teachers' retrospective interpretations of classroom interactions are central to an understanding of classroom life. Chapter 16 reports on a study that, among other things, documented the effect on classroom practices of involvement by teachers in action research networks. Despite their diversity, all three studies reflect the importance of providing teachers with a central role in curriculum research and development.



# TOWARD A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

## A Case Study

This article presents a rationale for the development of a collaborative approach between teachers and curriculum specialists in language curriculum design. The adoption of such an approach within the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) is described, as is the National Curriculum Project, set up within the AMEP to realize the ideals of a collaborative approach.

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The ‘curriculum’ of a given institution or language program can be looked at from different perspectives. On the one hand, it can be seen as a statement of intent, the ‘what should be’ of a language program as set out in syllabus outlines, sets of objectives, and various other planning documents. Another perspective is that of the curriculum as ‘reality,’ that is, in terms of what actually goes on from moment to moment in the language classroom (Nunan, 1988).

Recognition of the fact that there is no simple one-to-one relationship between intention and reality has promoted interest in classroom research in recent years (see Chaudron, 1988, and van Lier, 1988, for comprehensive reviews of classroom research from quite different perspectives). This work on classroom research has underlined the complexity of language learning and teaching and has provided insights into why there are mismatches between what is planned, what actually gets taught, and what learners learn. Additional insights have been provided from second language acquisition research, which has demonstrated that mismatches between the various curriculum perspectives can be accounted for, among other things, by speech-processing constraints (see, for example, Pienemann, 1985).

In addition to a range of diverse and sometimes contradictory views on the nature of language and language learning, curriculum developers need to take account of and respond to data coming from classroom researchers, second language acquisition researchers, test and evaluation specialists, funding authorities, learners, teachers, and so on. They need to incorporate these into a design that is consonant with the political, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the language programs will be implemented.

Most curriculum proposals can be ranged on a 'control continuum', with fully centralized curricula at one extreme and decentralized curricula at the other. The history of education systems can be seen as an interplay between forces representing centralization and decentralization. For example, in the 20 years following the Second World War, many school systems were based on the center-periphery model, wherein, in Schwab's (1983) graphic phrase, curricula were 'decided in Moscow and telegraphed to the provinces' (p. 240). This was followed by a period in which various forms of school-based curriculum development were experimented with. (See also Richards's [1987] distinction between bottom-up and top-down approaches to the language curriculum.)

The interplay between centralized and decentralized forms of curriculum development is reflected in language curriculum development. During the 1970s, a number of developments prompted experiments with various forms of school-based curricula. Changing views on the nature of language, particularly the development of communicative language teaching in its various guises with its implication of differentiated curricula for different learner types, the work of the Council of Europe with its behavioral approach to syllabus design, Munby's (1978) needs-based approach, the application of competency-based education to second language learning, and, in Britain, the Graded Levels of Achievement in Foreign Language Learning (Clark, 1987; Clark and Hamilton, 1984), all promoted the cause of decentralized language curriculum development.

School-based models accord greater power and control to the classroom practitioner in the curriculum development process than do more centralized models. This article describes an experiment that has employed such an approach, an experiment in which the practitioner has been accorded a central role in the curriculum development process and in which the renewal of the curriculum reflects a collaborative effort between teachers and curriculum developers.

## **Background**

The Australian Adult (Im)migrant Education Program (AMEP) is a large, federally funded English language education program for immigrants and refugees. Some 1,500 teachers provide instruction in 300 language centers across the country. Annual enrollments total 130,000.

Until the early 1980s, the AMEP curriculum followed a classical center-periphery model. Course materials were centrally produced by a team of curriculum writers and disseminated to the various language centers around the country. The course materials, which were, in effect, covert teacher-training instruments as well as the embodiment of the chosen curriculum model, were intended for all learners undertaking AMEP courses, irrespective of their needs, previous learning experiences, and so on.

The fragmentation of client groups, which was accelerated during the late 1970s and early 1980s by a large influx of Southeast Asian refugees, drove home the message that a single curriculum cannot hope to cater to a huge and diverse group of learners. Influenced by the work of the Council of Europe (see, for example, Holec, 1981; Richterich, 1972, 1983; Richterich and Chancerel, 1978), the AMEP embraced a needs-based philosophy in which a centralized model was abandoned and in which curriculum activity was encouraged at the local level. However, it is worth noting that, although the funding authority (the Federal Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs) was happy to promote

a reformulation at the level of pedagogy, it retained a centralized approach to program management and administration.

In order to facilitate and assist school-based curriculum development, a teaching and research unit, the National Curriculum Resource Centre (NCRC), was established in 1984. Philosophically, the Centre was committed to localized curriculum development and focused its energies on establishing processes and structures to support local initiatives.

As a federally funded program, the AMEP was subject in 1985–1986 to a ministerial committee of review. The committee noted the difficulties teachers were having in implementing the school-based curriculum and recommended the establishment of a curriculum ‘task force’ consisting of three curriculum experts. This group’s brief would be to develop a curriculum model and produce a set of guidelines for its successful implementation (Campbell, 1986). The danger of such an initiative was that it could lead to a return to a centralized approach to curriculum design.

As the body responsible for curriculum issues, the NCRC was asked to manage the task force, in accordance with Campbell’s (1986) recommendation. However, it wanted to do so without returning to a centralized curriculum model. In order to determine what the teachers thought, a detailed ethnographic study of the AMEP’s professional work force was undertaken (see Nunan, 1987, for a detailed account of this study, its methodology and its results). Over half of the 1,500 teachers in the AMEP were surveyed and interviewed.

The most striking result of the study was the affirmation by teachers of the localized approach to curriculum development. However, almost all teachers called for greater support. From several hundred oral and written submissions, 18 principal problem areas emerged. These are listed in rank order in Table 14.1.

The study revealed that problems with the chosen curriculum model could not be seen solely in pedagogic terms but that they had administrative, managerial, and organizational roots. In many centers in which the virtues of localized

*Table 14.1* Reasons for lack of curriculum continuity

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Item</i>
1	Lack of curriculum guidelines or models
2	The philosophy and nature of the Program
3	Lack of skills or experience on the part of teachers
4	Lack of time for consultation and communication
5	Lack of information about students’ previous courses
7	Lack of appropriate administrative support
7	Problems caused by students (e.g., irregular attendance)
7	Heterogeneous groups and diverse learner types
9	Courses too short
10	Lack of support resources
11	Rapid changes in TESOL theory and practice
12	Lack of appropriate teaching materials
13	Lack of appropriate assessment procedures
14	Lack of information for learners about courses
15.5	Lack of funding
15.5	High teacher turnover
17	Lack of information and induction for new teachers
18	Class sizes too large



curriculum development were acknowledged by classroom practitioners, program administrators continued to behave as though they still belonged to a centralized system. In one center, for example, teachers were prevented from organizing flexible learner groupings that were responsive to learner needs because the administration would not provide the required number of roll books and learner logs.

From the study, it was clear that the great majority of teachers endorsed a bottom-up, school-based approach to curriculum renewal despite the fact that it made their job more complex and difficult. A minority of teachers felt that curriculum issues should not be their responsibility and said they would be happy to implement a curriculum produced by outside experts. Whether they would be satisfied, in the eventuality of such a curriculum being produced, is a matter for conjecture.

All teachers wanted greater support as they planned, implemented, and evaluated their programs. The major issue was how this support might be provided. In the short term, many centers established professional support networks and program band meetings (meetings between teachers working with similar learner types). Although these networks and meetings provided teachers with collegial support (Shaw and Dowsett, 1986), this support was not sufficient for most classroom practitioners.

In the end, the solution that emerged in lieu of the curriculum task force was the establishment of a network of teacher-based curriculum projects under the rubric of the AMEP National Curriculum Project (NCP). The establishment of this Project is described below.

## **The National Curriculum Project**

The NCP was given a limited lifespan (18 months) and a limited budget (an amount equivalent to what would have been required to employ three task force consultants for 18 months, had the original Campbell (1986) recommendations been fully implemented. The project coordinators developed a four-stage strategy for implementing the NCP.

### ***Stage 1: school-based curriculum documentation***

It was decided to use most of the available funds to underwrite projects in which teachers documented curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation activities and carried out a number of classroom research projects. Teachers were required to bid for funds by submitting a curriculum funding proposal. In formulating their proposals, teachers were assisted by local curriculum advisers and support staff. The following information was required on curriculum funding proposals:

- 1 Curriculum process to be documented
- 2 Location
- 3 Starting and terminating date
- 4 Total and distribution of teaching hours
- 5 Teaching plans
- 6 Student profile
- 7 Learning objectives

- 8 Rationale for documenting this curriculum process
- 9 Description of documentation to be provided
- 10 Other relevant information

Teachers were funded for 10 percent of total teaching time of the learning arrangement being documented. Thus, a bid to document a 300-hour course would, if successful, attract 30 hours of funding.

Exactly 100 proposals were submitted by individual teachers and small teacher teams for funding. Tables 14.2 and 14.3 show the range and diversity of proposals. The former provides a breakdown of all proposals according to their principal curriculum focus, and the latter provides a more detailed illustration of the actual proposals received from one state.

The submissions received provide insight into those curriculum areas and issues that were preoccupying teachers as well as those that, by their omission, were not so highly rated. Not unexpectedly, the greatest number of submissions related to the development of task and activity types. The work done within the AMEP in the last few years on learning styles and strategies was also reflected in the number of proposals received for this area. It is also worth noting the comparative lack of interest by teachers in summative assessment and evaluation – areas of intense interest to those funding the AMEP!

The project coordinators had two objectives in mind in providing small grants to many projects rather than giving all the available funding to the best of the submissions. The first objective was a process one. It was believed that the act of systematically working through and documenting curriculum processes would be a form of curriculum consciousness-raising for teachers, would help obviate the grass-roots distrust of the concept of curriculum revealed by the Nunan (1987) study, would act as a self-directed learning experience, and would provide those involved with practical skills in curriculum renewal. Given the fact that almost one third of the national work force of 1,500 teachers were directly involved in

*Table 14.2* Total number of submissions categorized according to principal curriculum focus

<i>Curriculum focus</i>	<i>No. of submissions</i>
Activities/task types	18
Independent learning strategies	16
Learning arrangement case studies	16
Formative evaluation	7
Learning arrangement materials	6
Objective setting	6
Prelearning arrangement needs analysis	5
Morphosyntactic sequencing	5
Teaching sequences	4
Summative evaluation	4
Teacher/learner needs analysis	3
Learning activity course outline/design	3
Use of the learner's first language	2
Team teaching	2
Self-access center case study	1
Administrative/curriculum interface	1
Professional development	1

*Table 14.3* Curriculum documentation proposals from Adult Migrant Education Services (Victoria)

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1	Distance learning materials for Spanish speakers
2	Use of computerized information for class placement
3	Development of learning objectives from proficiency rating scales
4	Provision of collegial support for teachers with similar learner types
5	Use of withdrawal support classes for learners with special needs
6	Development of access skills (job/study skills for disadvantaged migrant/refugee young adults)
7	Documentation of the work of bilingual support, bridging course, computer-assisted learning, and learning objectives working parties
8	Use of (Spanish) LI in the language program
9	Interviewing procedures for diagnosis and placement
10	The curriculum/administrative interface
11	Provision of inservice curriculum support
12	Development of independent learning strategies
13	How to deal with mixed proficiency groups
14	Strategies for teachers to influence the organization and management of a learning center
15	Counseling and student referral
16	Refugee youth program
17	The interface between language centers and centers for technical and further education
18	Strategies for encouraging the development of oral interaction skills in older adolescent students with interrupted schooling
19	Diagnosis and placement of students in special literacy classes
20	Bilingual strategies for developing advanced writing skills
21	A model for ongoing course evaluation
22	Exercises for developing morphosyntax
23	Negotiation of the curriculum with unemployed migrants
24	Use of bilingual assistants in the language class
25	Development of strategies for low-level literacy programs

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one project or another, it was believed that this in itself would assist in obviating some of the problems associated with localized curriculum development.

The second objective was product-oriented. The NCP was to provide curriculum resources that could be collated and disseminated back into the Program for centers to exploit in their curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation. In other words, the AMEP curriculum was to be derived from representative samples of practice from within the classroom itself.

To provide teachers with a common vocabulary to assist them in documenting their curriculum processes and to facilitate the collation of what would inevitably be a massive amount of data, a set of guidelines was drawn up and distributed to teachers taking part in the NCP. However, it was not mandatory for teachers to submit data along the lines suggested in the guidelines. In several cases the nature of the curriculum processes being documented made it undesirable to follow the format suggested by the guidelines. The guidelines addressed the following areas:

- 1 Principles of adult learning
- 2 Goals for learners in the 0 to 2 proficiency range as determined by the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (ASLPR) Scale (Ingram, 1984)

- 3 Objective setting and sample objectives for learners in the ASLPR Scale range 0 to 2
- 4 Sample activity types for learners in the ASLPR Scale range 0 to 2
- 5 Selection of experiential content
- 6 Sequencing of learning tasks
- 7 Development of learning strategies and skills
- 8 Learner assessment and program evaluation
- 9 A practical framework for learner-centered curriculum development
- 10 Use of second language acquisition research to grade morphosyntax

## **Stage 2: data analysis**

The second stage of the NCP was to analyze and categorize the enormous amount of data resulting from Stage 1. Two experienced teachers were released from their regularly assigned positions to temporary duty within the NCRC to sort and categorize the data and, in consultation with the project coordinators, to create a data base that would allow for the ready retrieval of data. The data base was created on a Macintosh computer using Filemaker Plus, a powerful, flexible, and easy-to-use software package that allows large amounts of text to be stored in a number of specially created information categories.

The project teachers created 19 categories as follows:

- 1 Project code number
- 2 Location of project
- 3 Title of project given by teacher/team responsible for the project
- 4 Project authors
- 5 Class type (13 class types were identified, and each project was assigned to one or more of these)
- 6 Proficiency range as measured by the ASLPR Scale (Ingram, 1984)
- 7 Age range
- 8 Pace (whether the project targeted slow-, medium-, or fast-track learners)
- 9 Ethnicity (principal ethnicity of learners)
- 10 Length of residence in an English-speaking country
- 11 Educational background
- 12 Sex mix
- 13 Occupations
- 14 Learning arrangement (e.g., community class, individualized learning, small-group approach, team teaching)
- 15 Duration of course
- 16 Intensity (e.g., whether full/part-time, number of hours per week)
- 17 Whether the project was tested or was a plan or proposal
- 18 Evaluation (each project was given an evaluative rating as to its potential utility as a curriculum planning tool)
- 19 Content (what the documentation actually provided in terms of needs analysis, student profiles, course outline, description of methodology, description of learning styles, lesson plans, materials/references, diary of activities, assessment, evaluation)

Table 14.4, which presents one of the data-base records, illustrates the coding of information.

Table 14.4 Sample record from data base

	<i>Information category</i>	<i>Data</i>
1	Code	SAPA
2	Location	[Deleted]
3	Title	Part-time, ongoing course
4	Authors	[Name deleted]
5	Class type	General, social/communicative interaction for learners in the ASLPR Scale 1– to 1+ range
6	Proficiency	ASLPR Scale 1– to 1+
7	Age range	20 to 50
8	Pace	Medium
9	Ethnicity	Mixed
10	Length of residence	6 months to 7 years
11	Education	Mixed; 3 to 14 years of formal education
12	Sex mix	21 male, 11 female
13	Occupations	16 factory workers, 6 unemployed, 10 not in work force
14	Learning arrangement	Classroom, one teacher
15	Duration	9 weeks
16	Intensity	Part-time, 4 hours/week
17	Tested	Yes
18	Evaluation	Likely to be of intermediate utility
19	Content	Course outline, lesson plans, materials/references, activity evaluation, course assessment

Individuals can gain access to relevant records by specifying a need relating to one or more of the information categories. For example, information on the project listed in Table 14.4 would be called up by a request for data on part-time courses for factory workers, by a request for data on courses with a social/communication orientation for intermediate proficiency, mixed-ethnicity groups, and so on.

In addition to the curriculum documentation data that were fed directly into the data base, a number of projects yielded valuable and interesting data that did not fit the data base. A brief description of one such project will demonstrate the value of collaborative, classroom research between teachers, researchers, and curriculum specialists.

In this particular project, the teacher concerned had become interested in the second language acquisition research on speech processing and learnability, particularly the teachability hypotheses based on the research of Pienemann and Johnston (see, for example, Johnston, 1985; Pienemann, 1985; Pienemann and Johnston, 1987). In setting up the project, she was assisted by a curriculum adviser with expertise in second language acquisition research and research methods.

The aims of the project were: (a) to test the predictions made by the Pienemann/Johnston model for one syntactic area (question formation), noting any variability across task types; (b) to document the practical ramifications for teaching methodology, syllabus, and materials development of attempting to take learnability into account in day-to-day teaching; and (c) to document a range of activity types and teaching materials that could be used in a course centered around asking questions and to identify any notable gaps.

Using semi-structured elicitation procedures, the teacher collected speech data from a sample of learners before the course and assigned them to a developmental stage according to the syntactic assessment procedure developed by Pienemann and Johnston (1987). Classroom instruction was then focused on those question forms that the Learnability Hypothesis predicted would be learnable according to learners' developmental stage. Speech data were collected from learner performance on classroom tasks, and post-course data were then collected using pre-course procedures. These were analyzed and checked against the predictions of the Learnability Hypothesis.

Although space does not permit a detailed analysis and critique of this particular project, this brief description does illustrate one way in which a collaborative approach between classroom practitioner and curriculum adviser can yield classroom data that, potentially at least, can be utilized in subsequent curriculum development.

### **Stage 3: creation of curriculum frameworks**

During Stage 3, a number of senior teachers from within the AMEP were temporarily released to the NCRC to write curriculum frameworks derived from the data yielded during Stages 1 and 2. They carried out this work under the guidance of a steering group that consisted of the project coordinators and three outside curriculum consultants. Eleven frameworks, written for a range of class/learner types (see Table 14.5), were tested.

The frameworks were written in such a way as to enable teachers working either individually or in small teams to systematize the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of their programs. They are thus intended as teacher-development tools as much as curriculum planning tools. This reflects the notion that, in school-based curriculum systems, curriculum development becomes largely a matter of teacher development. The following principles underlie the frameworks:

- 1 The teacher has a key role to play in curriculum development, particularly in systems such as the AMEP, in which courses are meant to be responsive to learner needs.

*Table 14.5 Class/learner types for which curriculum frameworks were written*

<i>ASLPR Scale proficiency level</i>	<i>Class/learner type</i>
0 to 1–	Indo-Chinese; cultural focus
0 to 1–	Slow; elderly; reading/writing focus
0 to 1	Young; fast-track; survival
1– to 1+	Young; fast-track; further education focus
1– to 1+	General; social/communicative interaction
1 to 2	Job-seeking; work experience focus
1+	Social interaction focus
1+	Media focus
1+ to 2	Education/study skills focus
1+ to 2	Long-term residents (stabilized learners); reading/writing focus
1+ to 2	Linked skills (bridging)
1+ to 2	Particular; professional skills focus
0 to 2	Mixed ability

- 2 Curriculum guidelines and frameworks should be flexible enough to allow teachers to work from a variety of different starting points in planning courses. Frameworks are devised so that teachers can start with resources (materials, course books, etc.), learning tasks, communicative skills, or lists of learning outcomes. They are intended to facilitate planning for courses with either grammatical, functional, or notional focuses.
- 3 Existence of a framework does not imply that courses derived from it will be identical. It is recognized that each course is unique, being shaped by interaction and negotiation between learners and teacher.

Although frameworks differ somewhat from one another, each contains the following information and resources:

- 1 An introduction and statement of underlying principles
- 2 A description of how the framework might be used
- 3 A description of the learner type for whom the framework is written
- 4 A statement of appropriate goals for the target group
- 5 A set of principles underlying the framework
- 6 Models and examples of alternative methods of program planning
- 7 Sets of syllabus-planning checklists (these include topics, tasks, objectives, functions, notions, morphosyntax, vocabulary, settings, learning styles, and strategies appropriate for the designated group)
- 8 Sample teaching units
- 9 Assessment and evaluation resources

#### **Stage 4: evaluating the project**

Ultimately the value of the NCP will be determined by the extent to which it makes a difference to curriculum development at the school level. This is one of the central questions to be answered by the formal evaluation of the Project.

At the outset of the NCP, an evaluator was appointed who, though outside the AMEP, had undertaken curriculum research within the Program and was therefore familiar with its history, politics, and aspirations. In keeping with the essentially collaborative flavor of the NCP, it was decided that a process- rather than a product-oriented approach should be taken toward the evaluation. To this end, the evaluator was provided with access to all the documentation relevant to the Project, including the transcripts of meetings – between one of the project coordinators and teachers and administrators – that gave shape to the NCP (described in Nunan, 1987). He was also invited to attend as participant observer at project management and consultation meetings. As a result, the evaluator was able to provide information and insights that were used formatively during the course of the NCP itself (for example, he was influential in encouraging a more process-oriented approach to the curriculum frameworks). A final, summative evaluation will be undertaken in spring 1990, by which time the frameworks will have been comprehensively tested and introduced into the Program.

In a project of this sort, it would be desirable to undertake a product-oriented evaluation, that is, to conduct pre- and post-project assessments to determine the efficacy of the intervention in terms of learning outcomes. In the current situation, however, this has not been possible because the NCRC has no mandate to

assess students, this being the sole responsibility of the state and territory education departments that are actually responsible for program delivery.

## **Discussion**

Numerous problems and difficulties arose in initiating and implementing the NCP. In the beginning, there was resistance from the funding authority, which wanted a return to a center-periphery curriculum model. There was also a certain amount of resistance and suspicion from some state program managers and administrators (although, it must be said, there was also a great deal of support). In addition, many teachers mistrusted the intentions of the project coordinators.

Once initial submissions were received, another major problem emerged: Many of the most experienced and talented teachers within the Program had not bothered to apply for funding. Presumably this was because these teachers had few problems in developing their own curriculum and saw little point in providing assistance to teachers who were having problems.

During Stage 2, the data-analysis stage, it became apparent that the data were uneven in terms of quality. Some of the projects resulted in high-quality information that could be fed directly into the curriculum frameworks, whereas others provided very little usable data at all. During Stage 3, it was therefore necessary to censor, cull, and reformulate a great deal of data.

With the wisdom of hindsight, it is possible to identify ways in which a project such as the NCP could be carried out differently next time around. In particular, the democratic impulse to involve as many teachers as possible would probably be tempered by the need to obtain the cooperation of those teachers who have the most experience and skill in curriculum development.

Greater care would also be taken in identifying learner groups and class types, although decisions made on educational grounds can be preempted by political and demographic factors. In the case of the NCP, changing patterns of immigration and government policy have, since the initiation of the Project, changed the profile of AMEP clients and made largely redundant several of the curriculum frameworks.

Given the instability of learner types, it becomes extremely important for a learner-centered, school-based curriculum model to be reinforced at the local level with key teachers who have the skills and knowledge necessary to help their peers to plan, implement, and evaluate a range of programs that can be readily adapted to changing client groups. It would certainly be educationally indefensible to return to a more centralized approach.

## **Conclusion**

The localized, school-based approach to the language curriculum outlined in this article attempts to model the curriculum on instances of successful practice and is therefore tied closely to the classroom. Such curriculum development requires a collaborative approach between the different stakeholders in the educational enterprise, including teachers, researchers, curriculum specialists, and program managers and administrators.

The AMEP National Curriculum Project, an ambitious attempt at curriculum renewal at the national level involving many teachers, administrators, and



curriculum personnel, is an example of such an approach. This Project bears similarities to a number of other attempts at school-based language curriculum renewal, most particularly and recently to the Graded Levels of Achievement in Foreign Language Learning in Britain and the Australian Language Levels Project (both of which are described in some detail in Clark, 1987). The following characterization aptly summarizes the essential spirit of localized curriculum development:

The two most important factors in school-focused curriculum renewal are the quality of relationships between participants and the sharing of responsibility. Education is about people, whether it be teacher education or pupil education, and the most valuable contribution that a project leader can make is to ensure that the diverse strengths, energies, and personalities of those involved are harnessed and forged together harmoniously. For this to occur, a democratic framework of shared responsibilities is essential, rather than a simple hierarchical structure. The sort of accountability that seems to work best in curriculum renewal is not managerial . . . but rather one of mutual responsibility.

(Clark, 1987: 136)

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# HIDDEN VOICES

## Insiders' Perspectives on Classroom Interaction

I have included this chapter because it exemplifies my belief that any research which sets itself the goal of understanding and illuminating the dynamics of what goes on in language classrooms (or any other classrooms for that matter) must necessarily involve teachers and, where possible, learners as participants rather than objects, in the collection and interpretation of data from the classroom. The study also reflects my long-held belief that it is the teacher and learners who 'own' the classroom, and that they are not 'objects' to be manipulated for the benefit of researchers and the research process.

From K.M. Bailey and D. Nunan (eds.), *Voices from the Language Classroom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Reprinted with permission.

As I explore my teaching by describing – recording, transcribing, and coding communications – rather than by seeking prescriptions and judgments from others, patterns are broken both consciously and unconsciously. I have sought alternatives in teaching and found them. After I found that I have alternatives, I felt freer and securer about deciding on activities for the students. Throughout the internship, I have learned how to see teaching more clearly and differently. In other words, I realized how much more I can do. . . .

(Gebhard and Ueda-Motonaga, 1992: 190)

In an eloquently argued case for the evolution of a nexus between classroom research and teacher education, Wright (1992) describes a situation familiar to almost anyone who has ever walked through a school while a lesson is in progress:

Imagine we walk down the corridor of a school and hear much noise coming from a classroom. We might at first assume that it is the result of the teacher having lost control of the class (or some other plausible explanation). On arrival and entrance to the classroom, we find the students engaged in an

activity which involves animated discussion, in groups, with the teacher participating as a monitor in the activity.

(p. 194)

In this anecdote, Wright provides a warning against drawing conclusions about behavior without knowing the context in which the behavior occurs. He wryly concludes that 'we can only know what the noise is about by referring directly to the context in which the noise occurs' (ibid.).

It seems to me that a great deal of research in our field is conducted in contexts where classroom noise either is unheard or is considered irrelevant and therefore removed from the equation before the numbers are added up and their significance determined. This lack of contact with the reality of the classroom has driven a wedge between researcher and practitioner which threatens to become a gulf unless steps are taken to bridge it. In this chapter, I would like to make a modest contribution toward closing the gap between theory and practice, and between researcher and teacher. I shall try to do this by giving teachers an opportunity to have their voices heard, and their perspectives and interpretations presented.

## **The study**

In this section, I shall describe the subjects and context of the investigation and the research question. I shall then set out some of the data and provide my own descriptive and interpretive account of those data. Because ethnographic investigations of this type are data rich, my account must necessarily be selective.

## **The cohort**

The participants in this study were nine ESL teachers who were teaching in Australia and were also undertaking some form of professional qualification. They varied greatly in their professional backgrounds and length of experience. Three had been practicing for less than one year. The others ranged in experience from one to 15 years.

## **The research question**

The question which provided my point of departure was relatively easy to pose: In what ways are the processes of classroom instruction illuminated by the voices of the teachers? Finding answers in the data described herein was less straightforward. Moreover, as I analyzed these data, other questions and issues emerged, and I had to struggle to regain the original focus while admitting emerging insights into the analysis.

## **The research procedure**

The data for the investigation were gathered through a four-stage procedure:

### **1 Before the lesson**

Before the lesson began, I obtained background information on the teacher and took a copy of the teacher's lesson plan. (The teachers were asked to

provide a detailed lesson plan, as well as biographical data in advance of the lesson.)

2 During teaching

The lesson was observed and recorded, and notes were taken to assist in the transcription process. Particular note was taken of those points at which the teacher deviated from the lesson plan.

3 After the lesson

Immediately after the class, I talked about the lesson with the teachers, asking them to focus on those points at which they had deviated from their plan.

4 Follow-up

The lesson was transcribed and a copy was sent to the teacher to annotate. The transcripts, annotations, and post-lesson protocols were then analyzed using a range of qualitative data analysis procedures. (For a description of such procedures, see Nunan, 1992.)

In attempting to gain insights into the question I had posed, I revisited the transcripts, my observational notes, and the teachers' post-lesson protocols and annotations many times. As I aligned the different sources of data related to critical classroom incidents, adding successive layers of interpretation, the incidents themselves were transformed, as we shall see.

## **Data analysis**

This section discusses some of the themes which emerged from the data. Given the quantity of data and constraints of space, I have been selective in the choice of issues and amount of data provided. However, I hope that enough supporting data are provided to sustain my case.

### ***Getting the action going***

In the ebb and flow of any given lesson, there are several critical moments. The first few minutes seem particularly important in creating the appropriate tone of the lesson, and the atmosphere which is established at the beginning of the class often persists for the duration of the lesson.

The value added by the teacher's voice is illustrated by the following incident. I had noted the beginning of one lesson in the following field-note record:

The students wander into the class in twos and threes. As they begin to settle down, the teacher makes several of them change places. Students seem lethargic after lunch. Teacher then introduces and revises vocabulary. This goes on for over ten minutes, and the students begin to seem rather restive. I wonder why she's going on so long.

In this observation there is an implicit criticism of the pacing of the lesson. In the post-lesson debriefing, when asked for a commentary on this part of the lesson, the teacher reported:

... in the initial eliciting, I found it quite difficult to elicit the clothes – you know, 'What am I wearing? What's he/she wearing?' I got a bit [annoyed] at

that point because we did it last week, you see. It just makes you realize. We did it as a warm-up activity a week ago, and it had just gone totally out of their heads. So that was another thing I'd not anticipated. I thought they'd just tell me – and they didn't.

The teacher's voice here reveals several things. First, it dramatizes the fact that lessons are not discrete entities that come neatly prepackaged. As a course evolves over days, weeks, and months, a culture emerges through the interaction of personalities and events. Without an understanding of that culture, many of the events which occur in a particular lesson will be meaningless to the outside observer. One of the unfortunate realities of much classroom research is that it is carried out on individual lessons (and often on relatively short segments of individual lessons). This denies the researcher access to data which would render many seemingly odd or irrelevant interactions meaningful. Second, it shows that particular classroom events only take on meaning within the context of the course. In order to understand classroom events and the interpretations of those events by teachers and learners, we need to step outside the artificial temporal framework of 'the lesson'. (I shall return to this point later.) The third observation which we can make here relates to the teacher's theory of learning, and the assumption that the work which had been previously undertaken would be sufficient to ensure that learning had taken place. Throughout the data, there is evidence that everything that is said and done in the lesson and all comments on the lesson are underpinned by beliefs (often implicit) about the nature of language, learning, and teaching.

Particularly notable was the fact that very few lessons began with the teacher explicitly laying out the objectives for the students. The exception was the following:

T: Okay now, the approach we're gonna take here – there will be some traditional grammar in this, but what I'm going to try to give you is some analytical skills. Of how to analyze your own writing. Skills that you can take away from here and use them, OK? It's not just grammar we're looking at. It's . . . we're looking at how do I make myself understood to somebody else? Right? And how can I work on this on my own all of the time? Now some of you gave me some examples of writing in the beginning and I've looked at that to see exactly what kind of writing is it that you want to do and that you have to do. OK. And we've . . . we've called this course scientific writing and the type of writing you do is what we call [writes on board] 'report writing'.

In fact, this was the only lesson in the entire data base in which the teacher laid out the pedagogical terrain to be covered with more than an off-hand comment. How can we account for this apparent failure to address a basic pedagogical imperative? That is, how can we account for the fact that only one teacher bothered to explain to the students what it was they were supposed to be learning? I believe it demonstrates that the notion of a 'lesson' is not particularly salient for the teachers who took part in the study. Boundaries which appear tangible in a timetable dissolve against the emerging culture of the classroom. There is evidence in the data, both in the lesson transcripts and in the reports of the teachers themselves, that more salient than the 'lesson' are the analytical

units of ‘task’, which is smaller than ‘lesson’, and ‘course’, which is larger. This is explicit in the following opening gambit and commentary:

T: Remember last week when we were talking about our businesses that we were role-playing and we went to the ideas center and we had Lee to discuss our proposals for expanding into developing countries, and what I felt was that it would be a good idea to read about something which was a successful expansion into a developing country.

On reviewing the lesson transcript, the teacher made the unprompted comment that she ‘wanted to make a special effort to make a connection with previous lessons’.

In several cases, the teachers launch directly into the ‘meat’ of the lesson. For example, in one lesson the teacher entered the room, turned her back on the class, and wrote on the board: ‘A woman’s place is in the home.’ She then turned to the class and said:

T: Any comments about that sentence: ‘A woman’s place is in the home’?

S: Half correct.

T: Half correct? Why d’you say that, Henry?

S: Em, woman’s place not just at home. She should be go out and go work.

T: Yeah? What about the man?

S: Man is the same, I think.

The teacher justified this rather abrupt beginning to the lesson by stating, ‘I didn’t feel the need to use any other warmer than the initial stimulus for the functional target language as I know these students well.’

In this section, I have presented some of the data relating to lesson openings. These data illustrate a number of emerging issues which reappear later in the study. First, ‘lesson’ is not a particularly salient label for those invoked in the teaching/learning process. Second, in order to understand classroom behavior we need to study that behavior in the context in which it occurs – that is, in classrooms constituted for the purposes of teaching and learning, not in those which are established to provide cannon fodder for researchers. Third, in order to understand what is going on, we need to set the interpretations of the researcher against insights provided by the other actors in the educational drama.

### ***Maintaining control over the flow of events***

In reflecting on the lessons, teachers paid a great deal of attention to classroom management, particularly in maintaining control over the flow of events. In a previous study, I noted that this tendency to focus on classroom management rather than pedagogy was something that distinguished less experienced teachers from more experienced ones. (However, I would also reiterate that the concept of ‘experience,’ while familiar to most of us, defies definition, interacting as it does with other critical variables such as professional development opportunities and intensity, as well as length, of service.)

The close attention to managing and controlling lesson flow is illustrated in the following extract. In her lesson plan, the teacher had indicated that she intended to run a pair work activity in which students observed each other and

then sat back to back and described what the other was wearing. This is a fairly standard way of practicing the present continuous tense, a difficult tense to practice in any meaningful way because we rarely describe what we are doing in face-to-face interactions. However, during the course of the lesson, this activity simply did not happen. I remarked on this in my observation notes with a query. In the post-lesson debriefing, the teacher reported:

I dropped the activity . . . [because] . . . it probably would've gone on a bit too long, and as it was I was short for time anyway, so I made a decision to drop that.

Later in the lesson, in response to a question about the selection of partners in pair work and whether she let students self-select, the same teacher reported:

Oh, I get them to mix around. I like to change the pairs quite a lot. That's why it's good to get them in two groups and then split them up for a different part of the listening.

Another major departure from the lesson plan occurred as students were working in small groups sequencing a transcript of a listening text which had been cut up. The following extract and my field notes illustrate what happened:

[Students get in three groups on the floor.]

T: I'll give you five minutes to do this, five minutes.

T: [About 60 seconds later, T says] Two minutes. [She rewinds her tape.]

T: Come on, this group's nearly finished. One minute. One minute left.

T: OK, we'll listen to the conversation now. OK, so as you're listening to the conversation, can you check your sequence?

[The students listen to the interview and rearrange their strips of paper.]

T: Finished? Perfect. What does – this mean? [She writes on the board 'Erm'.] Erm. Erm. Is that a word?

S: No.

T: Erm. Why, why've we got that there? Why? Why erm?

S: We have some little bit time . . .

T: It's because we're listening to it. Listening to what's written down, so don't worry; don't think, oh, what does erm mean? It's just erm. And how do they say 'yes'? Do they say 'yes'?

S: Yeah (Yeah.) Australian accent.

T: Australian accent, do you think? (Yeah, yeah.) Anything accent.

As I observed this interaction I noted:

Teacher is really hustling the students. Several groups appear to be struggling. She then calls attention to a minor filler on the tape. What's the point? Won't it simply confuse the students?

In the debriefing, the teacher provided the following explanation:

[W]hen they were doing the sequencing on the floor, they were taking quite



a lot of time to do that and two groups hadn't finished, and I looked at my watch and I said hurry up, one minute left, and played the tape while they were still halfway through sequencing it. And then I only actually played the tape once, I didn't play it through again, but they'd got the right order by this stage; I just made the decision on the spot to tell them what 'erm' and 'yeah' were, 'cause one of them said, "Erm", what's "erm"?"

Here is yet another illustration that something which made little sense to an outside observer made perfect sense to those on the inside of the action. I believe this opacity to an outsider of many things that happen in the classroom reinforces the need for classroom stories to be told from the inside. In another classroom, the following interaction took place:

- T: You know when you're agreeing, like Shigeru did to me before. And it's nice to say, 'Mmm, and it's good to relax,' and then Jill said, she started to tell Patricia something now, and what does she say, Chong Dok?
- S: Well, you see.
- T: [T takes over] . . . it's like this. When you're starting to tell a story sometimes, you start, you say, 'Well you see, it's like this.' And that means you're starting to tell what it was like. Like Shigeru, he was really telling me a story about why he was late. He could have said 'Well, you see, Jill, it's like this. The train missed me this morning.' Okay, and then Patricia says, 'I've said my increase has been remarkable' and Patricia says – Shigeru?
- S: Yes, I saw that, but you must be careful . . .
- T: Yes, that's right. And then Jill says . . . Yami?
- S: Yes, I know.

It is almost impossible to convey interpersonal and affective aspects of the classroom in lesson transcripts. In the preceding extracts, the teacher and students weave the interaction together effortlessly, as though it had been rehearsed. While the interaction is largely meaningless to the outsider, the students find it amusing and make their contributions on cue. As it turned out, the obscure references were to an in-joke shared only by the class. Here is another example of Freeman's (1996) dictum that to tell the story one must know the story.

In explaining why the previous interaction happened when it did, the teacher reported that:

The students generally welcome both humor and personalizing of material to them. A little humor always helps to maintain interest and motivation. In this part of the lesson, we were using a little story that had evolved during the course.

In addition to illuminating the complexity of the classrooms, the transcripts and teachers' commentaries provide fascinating insights into teachers' styles. The teacher quoted in the following extract was relatively inexperienced and felt that she could not abandon her predetermined course of action, even though the students were evidently experiencing difficulty with it, and the flow of classroom events was obviously affected.

I began to realize the students were finding the activity quite complex and

hard, but it was too late to change it or abandon it, as they did need introducing to the vocabulary before starting to read the article. I ended up having to bring the pairs together.

From the data, it seemed that the more experienced teachers were much more comfortable with monitoring the class and modifying their lesson in the light of ongoing feedback. Here is a typical comment:

The warmer was beginning to take longer than I wanted to by this stage. I was beginning to wonder whether to pursue it for longer to involve all students in this stage or to move on. I feel less confident of timing at this level than at higher levels.

Another teacher said:

I realized that as the tape quality was poor I would have to distribute the written language from the tape sooner than expected.

The images and metaphors used by the teachers are also revealing. The data are shot through with references to pace, flow, tempo, and movement. One teacher noted:

Time was running out. I had to keep the pace moving along.

In another classroom, the teacher drew an activity to a rather abrupt halt, despite the fact that it seemed to be going well. The teacher accounted for this abrupt change of pace in terms of classroom management by saying:

The time limit prevailed again and I had to draw a halt. This activity was going well. Maybe if I'd anticipated my timings better I could have given students longer to work on this role play, which they got quite a lot out of.

In this section I have provided additional data on the importance of the insider's voice in helping to understand the life in language classrooms. In procedural terms, a great deal of classroom interaction is aimed at maintaining the flow of classroom interaction. In research terms, once again, we see that it is difficult to interpret the interactions without additional insights from those on the inside.

### ***The instructional process***

One striking point to emerge from the data was the relative paucity of what might be called direct instruction, in which the teacher explicitly instructs the learners. This might seem odd, given the fact that the layperson probably sees 'bringing the good news' as the central function of instruction. In addition, a great deal of the explicit instruction which occurred came about as the teachers responded to the immediate needs of the students. The majority of these impromptu explanations concerned vocabulary which students found difficult:

T: . . . 'collateral' actually means sort of security on somebody who is taking out a loan. If I was a very wealthy person – I'm rich and you want a loan

– you are poor – I could be your collateral – you would take out the loan and I would have the security for the loan. I would say to the bank ‘Yami will pay back the money and, if she doesn’t, I will give the bank the money.’ Collateral, security, another person arranges to be –

S: Another person guarantee for you to borrow money from the bank?

T: Yes, that’s right . . .

Direct evidence from students that they had ‘got it’ was particularly important for most teachers and, when it occurred, the teacher’s decision to engage in direct instruction was vindicated. For instance, in reviewing this piece of interaction, the teacher reported:

I was pleased this explanation was clear to the students. I think I’m gradually improving in explaining, defining, and giving instructions for them.

On some occasions the explanations were prompted by a direct request from a student. In many instances, however, the explanations were prompted by the teacher’s intuitive perception of the students’ needs. For example, in one lesson the teacher was working with an authentic tape in which an interviewer asked a series of questions about the interviewees’ life-styles. Rather than using complete question forms, the interviewer signaled the questions through intonation: ‘Drink?’ rather than ‘Do you drink?’ This gave rise to the following interaction:

T: What question does the interviewer ask? The interviewer? What question does the interviewer ask? What’s the question in here?

S: You smoke?

T: You smoke? You smoke? That’s not a proper question, is it, really? Proper question is ‘Do you smoke?’ So he says ‘You smoke?’ We know it’s a question because . . . why? You smoke? . . .

S: The tone.

T: The tone . . . the . . . the . . . what did we call it before? You smoke? What do we call this?

S: Intonation.

T: Intonation. You know by his intonation it’s a question.

When I observed the lesson, I was puzzled by this interaction. Why ‘deauthenticate’ a piece of authentic interaction by saying that the interviewer was not asking ‘proper’ questions? At the end of the lesson, I asked the teacher about this:

T: . . . And also the on-the-spot decision of, like, when it said ‘Drink?’

DN: So you hadn’t actually planned to teach that? . . .

T: No, I hadn’t. I mean, really, that would be an excellent thing to do in a follow-up lesson – you know, focus on questions.

DN: In fact, what you’re asking them to do in their work is focus on the full question forms; and yet in the tape they’re using a . . .

T: . . . Wasn’t, yeah. So I suppose it’s recognizing one question form by the intonation, then being able to transfer it into the proper question ‘Do you drink?’ rather than ‘Drink?’ I mean, that would be good to spend a lot

more time on at another point. But it seemed like it was good to bring up there. Just to transfer the information.

Here is another example of classroom interaction which makes little sense within the immediate context of the lesson in which it occurs, but which can be justified within the broader context of the course and the teacher's overall goals and objectives. I asked whether the principal objectives of the lesson – listening to authentic texts for key information – might have been subverted by the secondary aim of introducing and practicing question forms. The teacher, however, was quite comfortable with this.

DN: I'm wondering if it's too heavy a load to have the twin aims, the listening for key information aim and also the focus on questions aim – whether it's better to separate those out and look at the questions in a separate lesson?

T: What, the question forms? . . . Well, when I first looked at the material, I thought it was quite a straightforward listening, so therefore, if I give them a split listening, it'll make it more challenging for them. I took the decision to do that and I don't regret that. I mean, question forms are always difficult things to do; they're always difficult to slot in unless you do a whole lesson on question forms, so to throw them in now and again like that is quite valid, so to give the both focuses I thought was fine.

She was able to vindicate this stance by pointing out that:

I did anticipate that they would have a lot of problems with question forming; and their intonation and their spelling and things just need huge amounts of work on. But, as regards the activities, I didn't feel they were beyond their capabilities at all. I think they achieved quite a lot. I mean initially looking at it you think, 'Oh, God, there's so much there.' But they did actually succeed in filling the whole thing out.

Not all direct instruction was concerned with pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Several teachers provided input on language skills and learning strategies, such as the following:

Remember how we've been talking about the importance of looking at the heading and the pictures and some of the big writing to guess what the article's about? So what sort of idea could you get from just, not reading the small writing but just looking at the pictures and seeing the heading?

Another teacher took a similar perspective, focusing on strategies for dealing with unknown vocabulary:

[B]efore we start to read the article I'd like to help you with some vocabulary, and I've got a special activity that will help you to guess and learn the vocabulary that you need to know in order to do the article, to understand the article.

Despite the range and diversity of contexts which gave rise to them, and

regardless of the skills of the teachers and proficiency levels of the learners, these pieces of discourse all illustrate the central theme of this piece: that the universe in which a particular discourse is constructed is a collaborative achievement of the actors who inhabit that universe.

## **Discussion**

In this section, I shall draw out some of the substantive and methodological issues that emerged during the course of the study.

### ***On the substance of the study***

As I struggled with the wide variety of teachers, learners, course types, and contexts contributing data to this study, and as I ran and reran the data through the filter of my own prejudices and experiences, an important insight began to emerge. Despite the variety of teaching styles, learner types, and course objectives, at a certain level of abstraction all of these classes have one thing in common: They all illuminate an experiential view of the educational process. This experiential view is contrasted with traditional education by Kohonen (1992) in a key position paper on experiential language learning. The traditional view of knowledge is seen as objective and factual, and separated from the knower, while the experiential view sees knowledge as tentative, subjective, and intimately tied to the knower. Kohonen also contrasts the problem-solving approach of traditional pedagogy with the problem-posing approach of experiential learning. While traditional education is teacher-directed, with a focus on the acquisition of knowledge, the experiential approach values the contributions which learners make to the learning process. It is active and dynamic and focuses on the development of skills rather than on the acquisition of factual knowledge.

This constructive and interpretative concept of education is reflected in the extracts presented here. They show that both teachers and learners are actively involved in the construction and interpretation of their worlds. In addition, the interpretations of the teachers are central to the understanding of these worlds. The logical next step to pursue is to involve learners themselves in the interpretation of the pedagogic worlds they inhabit. In Kohonen's words, the experiential model offers potential for a learning atmosphere of shared partnership, a common purpose, and a joint management of learning:

Class behavior is owned by the whole group, of which the teacher is but one member. As the rules of conduct are agreed upon jointly, all share the responsibility for decisions and discipline.

(1992: 31)

In retrospect, the image which endures in my own mind is one of teachers and learners collaboratively constructing and inhabiting their own worlds. In this co-construction, the 'official' curriculum, which resides within the mandated documents, lesson plans, commercial textbooks, and bureaucratic directives to teachers and learners, is transformed, sometimes radically, in the experiential and ongoing interactions between the active participants in the classroom drama. In this drama, I am an outsider, a shadowy figure inhabiting a world which is neither connected to the ongoing drama nor entirely divorced from

it. As such, I have a voice, but it is only a partial one. It is a voice which needs to be complemented by the other, oftentimes hidden, voices of the classroom if anything like a three-dimensional picture of what drives the learning process is to emerge.

### ***On methodological issues in language teaching research***

The procedure used in this study was designed to give a voice to the teachers whose work was being investigated. At the conclusion of the lesson, teachers were provided with an opportunity to comment on what had happened, what unexpected events had arisen during the course of instruction, and what they felt had been the outcomes of the class. When the lessons had been transcribed, the teachers were provided with transcripts and given a further opportunity to comment on the lesson.

All of the teachers who took part in the study talked about the data collection procedure itself. Most also pointed out that the objective record of the lesson revealed many things which had not been apparent to them during the ongoing pedagogic action. The following examples illuminate their concerns:

'Rather a wordy explanation now that I see it in black and white. Maybe I should have got on to the vocabulary activity earlier instead of spending so much time talking in rather vague terms about the article first.'

'Quite a complicated explanation. Maybe a demonstration would have been simpler.'

'I ask a lot of questions without waiting for students to answer them. I find difficulty in controlling the level of my language when talking *about* the target structure or function at this level.'

'In retrospect, maybe it would have been better to have them do something oral here and delay the writing.'

'In retrospect I realize it would have been more useful to get students to summarize by feeding back to the class, rather than concluding the lesson with a lengthy monologue.'

It is clear from these comments that collaborative research not only provides insights into what happens as teachers and learners work together, but also acts as a device through which teachers can reflect upon their work and grow professionally as a result of that reflection. In this way theory, research, and practice are bound together and become mutually reinforcing.

In the preface to my book on research methods (Nunan, 1992: xi-xiii), I suggested that two alternative conceptions of the nature of research provide a point of tension within the book. The first view is that external truths exist 'out there' somewhere. According to this view, the function of research is to uncover these truths. The second view is that truth is a negotiable commodity contingent upon the historical context within which phenomena are observed and interpreted.

This study adheres unashamedly to the second conception of research. I would like to argue that qualitative and interpretive studies of teaching and learning, such as this, provide an alternative view of language classrooms to those accounts which emerge from the psycho-statistical research paradigm. In the field of general education, Stenhouse (1983) was able to argue that, by

the end of the 1970s, the illuminative tradition ‘now seems to have got off the ground both in research and evaluation. It no longer needs to fight to establish itself as an alternative to the “psycho-statistical” paradigm worthy of consideration’ (p. 1).

Things are rather different in the field of second language education. Recently I reviewed 50 widely reported pieces of classroom-oriented research. Of the 50, I found that only 15 were carried out in classrooms which were constituted for language teaching purposes. A further seven collected data from mixed environments. The majority of the studies ( $n = 28$ ) were based on data collected outside the classroom, in laboratory ( $n = 20$ ), simulated ( $n = 6$ ), and naturalistic ( $n = 2$ ) environments. I concluded from this study that future researchers would benefit from the informed incorporation of five key points into their designs and the execution of their studies:

- 1 The implementation of more contextualized research – that is, classroom-based, as opposed to classroom-oriented, research.
- 2 An extension of the theoretical bases of research agendas.
- 3 An extension of the range of research tools, techniques, and methods adopting and adapting these where appropriate from content classroom research.
- 4 A reevaluation of the distinction between process-oriented and product-oriented research.
- 5 A more active role for classroom practitioners in applied research.

(Nunan, 1991: 249–274)

I believe that the study described here goes some way toward incorporating at least some of these points into its design.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented, through the discourse of teachers and learners, an insider’s view of language instruction. It is now time to return to the point where I began and the question around which this entire enterprise revolves: In what ways are the processes of classroom instruction illuminated by the voices of the teachers? I hope I have ably demonstrated through the discourse of the classroom that to understand what is going on in language classrooms the voices of the teachers (and ultimately of the learners as well) must be heard. Classroom research, therefore, must become a collaborative enterprise between researcher, teacher, and learner. In the words of Freeman (1996):

Questions of what teaching is and what people know in order to teach are absolutely central; to avoid them is folly for everyone concerned with education. When these questions are ignored, the immediate, daily, and intimate knowledge of teachers and learners is belittled because it is overlooked and trivialized. . . . The findings of researchers and others concerned with understanding education ought to be viewed with legitimate skepticism if these people do not seriously entertain this central issue of what teaching is and of what people know in order to do it.

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# ACTION RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL RENEWAL

This final contribution to the collection is a recent updating of my approach to action research, a form of inquiry that has fascinated me for many years. The main purpose of the chapter is to show how action research can be a powerful means for professional development and renewal.

In C. Coombe, L. England and J. Schmidt (eds.), *Reigniting, Retooling and Retiring in English Language Teaching*, pp. 33–44, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Reprinted with permission.

### Abstract

In this chapter, I will make a case for action research as a powerful professional development tool: one that can empower teachers to take control of their own professional development. I will begin by looking at the concept of action research: what it is and how it evolved in education in general, and language education in particular. In the next part of the paper, I will focus on practicalities, looking at the steps in the action research process, as well as how to go about collecting, analyzing and presenting data. I will then present the results of a study I conducted which investigated the effect on teachers' attitudes and teaching practices as a result of being involved in action research. In the final part of the presentation, I will draw on my experiences as a consultant to two action research networks in looking at some of the problems that can occur in doing action research and some of the steps that can be taken to avoid these problems.

### What is action research?

The concept of action research is generally attributed to the father of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, who wrote about it in the 1940s (see Lewin, 1948, 1951). It was later taken up by educators who saw it as a means by which teachers could take control of their own professional destinies. Carr and Kemmis, two of the leading advocates of educational action research, wrote:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

(Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 162)

This is a widely cited, but rather ideologically loaded, definition. It highlights the practitioner driven nature of action research as well as the social justice bias, bequeathed to the concept by Lewin, a left-wing sociologist. However, it is rather too broad and programmatic to work as a definition for a form of research, being little more than a statement of reflective teaching (see, for example, Richards and Lockhart, 1994). For me the key difference between reflective practice and research is that the results of the process, the outcomes or products, must be published. I am using 'publish' here in its original sense: to make publicly available to others for critical scrutiny. (This may involve a print publication, but it could just as easily be a presentation at a teachers' conference or an inservice day.)

A more comprehensive definition is provided by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 5), who suggest that:

The linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and better articulation and justification of the educational rationale of what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: ideas-in-action.

In this quote, the authors highlight the links between ideas (or 'theory') and practice. They also point out that action research entails more than simply providing descriptive and interpretive accounts of the classroom, no matter how rich these might be. Action research is meant to lead to change and improvement in what happens in the classroom.

They go on to assert that:

A distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of critically informed action which seems likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice. *Action research is a group activity.*

(Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988: 6)

In summary, then, according to Kemmis and McTaggart, educational action research:

is carried out by classroom practitioners;  
is collaborative in nature; and  
is aimed at bringing about change.

I believe that action research has all of the characteristics of 'regular' research. In other words, it will contain research questions, data that have relevant

bearing on the questions, analysis and interpretation of the data, and some form of publication. I agree that it is the centrality of the classroom practitioner as a prime mover in the action research process that defines the approach and differentiates it from other forms of research. I also agree that it should be aimed at bringing about change rather than simply documenting ‘what is going on’. However, I think that Kemmis and McTaggart go too far in their assertion that, in order to qualify as action research, the process must be a group activity: that is, that it must be collaborative. Certainly, collaboration is highly desirable. However, to assert that without collaboration it cannot be called action research is unrealistic. Many practitioners would dearly love to collaborate, but are simply not in a position to do so.

### **What are the steps in doing action research?**

Most writers on action research agree that that it is a cyclical rather than a ‘one shot’ process. In other words, two or more research cycles are usually required in order to resolve the problem or puzzle that initiated the research. These cycles are listed and exemplified in Table 16.1.

The starting point in the cycle is usually some practical problem or puzzle that has to be confronted. Here is a narrative account of how I got started on a project, and what happened as a result:

It was my second semester at my new school, and I realized that things weren’t working out the way I wanted. It was a speaking skills class, but my students just wouldn’t open their mouths. The first semester had been the same. At that time, I had thought it was just a matter of my adjusting to a new situation. Now I knew it was something more serious. I decided to audiorecord my classes over several days. The recordings confirmed my observations. The tape was filled with the sound of my voice, punctuated

*Table 16.1* The action research cycle

<i>Cycle</i>	<i>Example</i>
<i>Cycle 1</i>	
Step 1	Problem/puzzle identification: ‘Student motivation is declining over the course of the semester.’
Step 2	Preliminary investigation: ‘Interviews with students confirm my suspicion.’
Step 3	Hypothesis formation: ‘Students do not feel they are making progress from their efforts. Learning logs will provide evidence to learners of progress.’
Step 4	Plan intervention: ‘Get students to complete learning logs each week.’
Step 5	Initiate action and observe outcomes: ‘Motivation is improving, but not as rapidly as desired.’
<i>Cycle 2</i>	
Step 6	Identification of follow-up puzzle: ‘How can I ensure more involvement and commitment by learners to their own learning process?’
Step 7	Second hypothesis: ‘Developing a reflective learning attitude on the part of learners will enhance involvement and motivation to learn.’
Step 8	Second round action and observation: ‘At the end of each unit of work, learners complete a self-evaluation of learning progress and attainment of goals.’

by prolonged silences and the occasional monosyllabic student response. I consulted colleagues who said it was a 'cultural thing'.

'So why have they enrolled in the class?' I asked.

'Well, they have no choice. Anyway, it isn't as if they don't want to be able to speak – it's a cultural thing. They want the magic language pill,' said one colleague.

So there was my challenge – and my dilemma: how to get my Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong students to speak English. After further thought and discussion, I decided to change the dynamics of the classroom, focusing more directly on group work, and encouraging students to speak through split information tasks [information gap tasks] in which the students *had to* speak English if the tasks were to be completed successfully.

I also tried to encourage students to redefine their own concept of what a classroom was [heretofore a place where the student sat silently while the teacher talked] by encouraging them to 'break the rules'. On one desperate occasion, I asked a group of reluctant speakers to stand up and move about the classroom as they completed their task. Amazingly, once they had been liberated from their seats, they began to talk.

I made audio and video recordings of my class, which I reviewed from time to time, and was gratified to find a dramatic increase in the amount of student speech. However, I also noted that the distribution of student speech was uneven. Not all students were taking advantage of the opportunities to talk.

This new awareness led me into a second investigative cycle, focusing this time on the reluctant speakers in the class. I decided that these students were having difficulty redefining their roles, and concluded that if I added a learning strategy dimension with a focus on learner roles and responsibilities, it might help sensitize them to this very different kind of classroom.

(Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, 2001: 133–134)

This narrative account illustrates a number of important points. Firstly, the researchable issue grew out of a practical problem that I was facing in my day-to-day work. Secondly, before I actually made changes to my teaching, I needed to collect some baseline data so that I had an objective record of what was going on. Thirdly, my initial intervention, although it was going in the right direction, revealed limitations and shortcomings. As a result, I needed to engage in a second round of data collection and analysis.

Doing the action research project also set off reverberations that went beyond the initial focus of my investigation. Although my attention was on the issue of learners' reticence to speak, other issues intruded. For example, I had to think about the cultural context in which my class took place, and the cultural appropriacy of what I was doing. As a result of the project I became much more sensitive to my students and their attitudes, views and needs. Also, as my students became more involved in their own learning process, and came to appreciate what I was trying to do and where I was 'coming from', they opened up to me. The result was a much richer experience for me as well as them. In the next section, I will look at this issue of the 'ripple effect' of action research on teachers' practice in general.

### **What effect can action research have on teachers' practices?**

One of the strong claims of proponents of action research is that it leads to improvements in practice. In this section, I will look at some of the data that supports this contention, including data from my own research into the effects on practice of engaging in the action research process.

In evaluating a series of action research projects carried out by teachers in a French immersion program in British Columbia, Lewis (1992) identified three main payoffs:

- 1 Through the process of systematically implementing their own choice of action project based on the needs of the students in particular, each teacher learned more about their own theories, or frames for teaching, and modified these frames to a certain extent.
- 2 The frames for teaching of the participants in this study are related to the bigger questions of second language education and education in general. Practice cannot be understood thoroughly without appreciating how educational theory is expressed within teachers' frames and neither can theory be useful without recognizing that what counts is how theory becomes expressed within practice.
- 3 The 'teacher as researcher' or 'reflection in action' approach to teacher education can be a very powerful way of facilitating change in the curriculum.

In the early 1990s, I was involved in working with a group of secondary school teachers who were involved in establishing an action research network. Although several teachers collaboratively investigated a particular issue (for example, implementing task-based teaching in their classrooms), most worked on individual projects. However, once a month they all met together for a half-day workshop to exchange ideas, share problems and generally give each other support. I was the facilitator at these half-day events. I also responded to individual teacher requests for assistance and advice when challenges arose between the monthly meetings.

Nunan (1993) documented changes made to classroom practice by this group of teachers as a result of being involved in action research. The results are summarized in Table 16.2.

Table 16.2 illustrates the positive effects that engagement in action research had on the practices of these teachers. The data reflect the 'ripple effect' that I referred to above. Teachers not only solved specific problems in their classrooms, but doing action research also led to improvements in their classroom management and interaction.

### **What are some of the problems and solutions in doing action research?**

Some time later, I acted as facilitator for another action research network. This time it was not with a group of ESL teachers, but with a group of high school LOTE (Languages other than English) teachers. They taught a wide range of languages from Spanish and Italian through Vietnamese and Indonesian to Polish and Greek. This group kept diaries and journals of their experiences during the semester long project. In the next section I will summarize the problems and challenges that teachers reported through their journals.

Table 16.2 Changes made to classroom practice as a result of taking part in action research

What effect did involvement in the action research project have on your teaching practices overall?

<i>Action</i>	<i>More</i>	<i>About the same</i>	<i>Less</i>
Tend to be directive	1	14	10
Try to use a greater variety of behaviors	16	6	0
Praise students	15	10	0
Criticize students	0	11	13
Am aware of students' feelings	18	6	0
Give directions	4	16	5
Am conscious of my non-verbal behavior	11	14	0
Use the target language in class	19	6	0
Am conscious of non-verbal cues of students	12	12	0
Try to incorporate student ideas into my teaching	20	5	0
Spend more class time talking myself	1	9	15
Try to get my students working in groups	15	8	0
Try to get divergent open-ended student responses	14	10	0
Distinguish between enthusiasm and lack of order	9	15	0
Try to get students to participate	18	7	0

## Problems/challenges

One of the issues that I asked them to document was the challenges, problems and pitfalls that they encountered along the way. A content analysis of their journals at the end of the semester revealed five major areas of concern as follows:

- lack of time;
- lack of expertise;
- lack of ongoing support;
- fear of being revealed as an incompetent teacher;
- fear of producing a public account of their research for a wider (unknown) audience.

### **Lack of time**

Lack of time was the single biggest impediment to carrying out action research. It was mentioned by every teacher in the network, and some teachers mentioned it virtually every time they made comments in their journals. Teachers are busy people, and involvement in the network, without removal of any of their other duties, added considerably to the burden of their daily professional life.

### **Lack of expertise**

Not surprisingly, the second most frequently nominated roadblock on the road to success was 'lack of expertise'. The word *research* raises all sorts of fears and uncertainties in the minds of teachers. Research is what other people do. It conjures up images of scientists in white coats with measuring instruments

and mysterious methods of carrying out statistical analyses. In fact one of the benefits of engaging in action research is to demystify the notion of research, and the idea that one needs a license to practice it. All teachers can do research, and should be encouraged to add a reflective teaching/action research dimension to their professional armory.

The idea of setting up a support network with a facilitator (me) was to assist teachers develop the basic skills of research design. These included:

- identifying a problem and turning it into a researchable question;
- deciding on appropriate data and data collection methods;
- determining the best way of collecting and analyzing the data;
- evaluating the research plan and reducing it to manageable proportions.

### ***Lack of ongoing support***

The third most frequently nominated challenge was lack of support ‘on the ground’. This lack of support most often came from the individual to whom the teacher reported (most typically the departmental chair or panel head or, in some cases, the school principal). In some cases the principal refused to sign the release allowing the research to go ahead. In other instances, it was done reluctantly – the attitude being ‘Well, this is a lot of nonsense, but, if you want to go ahead and waste your time, feel free. However, don’t let it interfere with your proper job – which is to teach.’

Interestingly, resistance and negativity sometimes came from colleagues. This took the form of an attitude that to do research indicated that one had ideas above one’s station. Lurking behind these negative attitudes was the notion that the proper job for a teacher is to teach, not to do research, and that this ‘make believe’ role as researcher was not a legitimate thing for a teacher to be doing.

To be fair, the opposite reaction was also encountered. A number of teachers reported that their status and esteem had risen among their peers as a result of having taken part in the action research network.

### ***Fear of being revealed as an incompetent teacher***

This was an interesting reaction. Any form of research carries within it the possibility of a negative result – or indeed no result at all. This view is reinforced to a certain extent by mainstream published research which rarely reports that research outcomes were inconclusive. These teachers were investigating aspects of their own practice. An inconclusive or negative outcome could be interpreted as a sign of failure, an indication that the person was an incompetent teacher. The fact that the results would be made public (see below) only added to the anxiety of the teachers.

### ***Fear of producing a public account of their research for a wider (unknown) audience***

This was the final, most frequently nominated, problem area. It was also the one over which I as the facilitator had the greatest difficulty. Teachers who have no trouble developing a sensible and coherent plan and putting it into action balked when it came to writing up and making their research public. A number

wanted to stop at this point, asking ‘Why do we have to make it public?’ and ‘I find writing so difficult.’

The answer, of course, is that, without a public account, the exercise constitutes reflective teaching, not action research. The publication need not be an article in a refereed journal. It could be a presentation at a teachers’ conference.

## **Solutions**

We experimented with a number of solutions to the problems. Chances of success for any given project will be maximized if:

- There is someone ‘on the ground’ to ‘own’ the project.
- One or more advisors with training in research methods and experience in doing research are available as needed to provide assistance and support to teachers.
- Teachers are given some release time from face-to-face teaching during the course of their action research.
- Collaborative teams are created, desirably across schools or teaching sites, so that teachers involved in similar areas of inquiry can support one another.
- Teachers are given adequate training in methods and techniques for identifying issues, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and presenting the outcomes of their research.

### ***Have someone on the ground to ‘own’ the project***

Completing an action research project is a little like completing a marathon at the same time as you carry out a wide range of other tasks. In order to succeed, teachers have to be in it for the long haul. After an initial burst of enthusiasm, most teachers ‘hit the wall’ (as marathon runners say). Energy and enthusiasm begin to wane, and many teachers are tempted to put off essential tasks, or even abandon the project completely.

Having an enthusiastic team member to act as a cheerleader can go a long way towards maintaining the enthusiasm of the group. In both of the action research networks I advised, a local facilitator filled this role. Both were senior teachers who had considerable experience as educational administrators. Importantly, they had also successfully completed action research projects of their own. This gave them credibility among teachers, and enabled them to act as a bridge between teachers and educational bureaucrats and administrators.

These local facilitators were proactive as well as reactive. They maintained frequent contact with the teachers involved in the network through telephone, email and occasionally face-to-face meetings, and were able to identify those teachers who were ‘at risk’ of dropping out. When teachers contacted them with practical problems and blockages they were able to offer advice from their own perspective.

### ***One or more advisors with training in research methods and experience in doing research are available as needed to provide assistance and support to teachers***

Even with the support of a collaborative network of fellow teachers, doing action research can be lonely and isolating. The chances of long term success



will be enhanced if someone is available at reasonably short notice to provide technical advice. This is important at all stages of the action research cycle.

In the case of the action research networks I have drawn on for the purposes of this chapter, one of the local facilitators was in the middle of doing a doctorate, and was able to answer many teachers' queries directly. The other facilitator had a recently completed master's degree, and was able to get help from his former professors. As project advisor, I was also available to advise facilitators and teachers as required.

### ***Teachers are given some release time from face-to-face teaching during the course of their action research***

As I mentioned in the preceding section, the single greatest impediment to the successful completion of an action research study is time, or the lack thereof. It is also a factor militating against teachers doing their best. The hundred and one pressures faced by teachers as they go about their daily professional lives conspire to push action research to the bottom of the agenda.

An operating principle I have tried to adhere to (with limited success) is that if you put something in then you should take something out. In other words, if you add a new item to your daily agenda, then you should remove an existing item. One way of freeing up time for teachers to do quality action research is to give them less teaching to do.

This may seem a risible suggestion in this day and age when bureaucrats have taken charge of educational agendas in many parts of the world. However, it is surprising what can be achieved with persistence and a well formulated rationale. In our action research networks, we had some success. In one case, a principal agreed to adjust teaching loads so that, while teachers had the same annual teaching load, they did comparatively less teaching in the semester in which they were doing their action research. In other cases, schedules were rearranged so that teachers had blocks of time (in one case one whole day a week) free to focus on their research.

### ***Collaborative teams are created, desirably across schools or teaching sites, so that teachers involved in similar areas of inquiry can support one another***

This was the essence of our action research networks. Unlike Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), I do not believe that collaboration should be a defining feature of action research. It is, nonetheless, highly desirable. Teachers who are mutually engaged in action research inquiry of a similar nature understand one another in ways that others involved in the educational enterprise do not. In the words of Donald Freeman, 'To tell the story, you have to know the story.' In other words, to be able to understand and convey an experience, you have to have lived that experience from the inside.

There is no doubt that the collaborative teams we set out within our action research networks provided tremendous support for the teachers involved and materially enhanced the quality of the outcomes. While supportive round-table discussions sometimes became 'grouch' sessions, these were relatively rare. On the whole, teachers reported a great deal of satisfaction with the support they received from their colleagues.

**Teachers are given adequate training in methods and techniques for identifying issues, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and presenting the outcomes of their research**

As with any other project, from buying a home to writing a novel, success demands adequate planning and preparation. In the case of action research, giving teachers training in research methods and providing adequate planning time *before* they embark on the research will enhance the chances of success. At the beginning of the process, once teachers have identified an issue, problem or puzzle, the trick is to get them to think small. Many teachers, in the first enthusiastic flush of the project, begin sketching out a proposal that would require a piece of doctoral research to deal with.

Another challenge is to convince teachers that qualitative data collection and analysis is research. Many who have had minimal contact with research come to the project with the mistaken idea that research must necessarily involve number crunching. Ironically, it is this notion that lies behind much of the trepidation that teachers feel about doing research.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to make a case for the use of action research as a tool for professional growth and development. In the first part of the paper, I defined action research, suggesting that it contained all of the ingredients of 'regular' research, but that its unique quality was the centrality of the classroom practitioner in initiating and carrying out the research. I then illustrated the various steps in the action research cycle.

In the next part of the paper, I presented empirical data drawn from two action research networks that provides strong support for the claim that involvement in action research can have a positive effect on teachers' professional growth and development.

The final part of the paper also drew on data from the action research networks. In this section, I looked at the problems and pitfalls faced by teachers who were engaged in action research. I then described some of the strategies that helped teachers over these roadblocks to successfully completing and presenting their research.

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